WORLD CUP 2026 PLAY-OFFS

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Special feature on the battle to be Brazil's World Cup striker

BOLT FROM BRAZIL

IGOR THIAGO SPOTLIGHT:

Brentford's in-form striker ready to gatecrash Brazil's World Cup party

PLUS

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE STATS • AFCON SQUADS • IRISH STARLETS • KAZU MIURA • AMATEUR NATIONS CUP • PREVIEWS: LEAGUE OF IRELAND, BRAZIL, MLS, J. LEAGUE & INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE

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It might be hard to believe for anyone who sat through Luxembourg 0-0 Republic of Ireland last year, but Irish football is on the rise. Troy Parrott's heroics have given the national team a shot at World Cup qualification, the domestic league is thriving as a new campaign gets underway, and an exciting generation of talent is starting to emerge.

Speaking of talent, Brentford striker Igor Thiago has taken the Premier League by storm this season. We've taken a look at his rise, and sized up his chances of wearing Brazil's No.9 shirt this summer.

Elsewhere, we look back on AFCON and the league phases of Europe's biggest club competitions, and ahead to the 2026 World Cup play-offs at the end of March.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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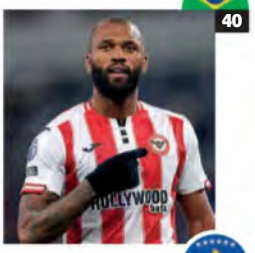

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England...Arsenal's winning goal hits the back of the net in the Women's FIFA Champions Cup final *(more on page 72)*

Kuwait...PSG goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier leads the celebrations after helping his team defeat Marseille on penalties in the French Champions Trophy final

Spain...Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe scores a Panenka penalty in the La Liga clash against Villarreal

England...Spurs' Dominic Solanke scores a scorpion kick goal against Manchester City

Portugal...goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin is mobbed by his team-mates after heading in a sensational late goal against Real Madrid to send Benfica into the knockout round of the Champions League *(more on page 50)*

Republic of Ireland...the ten League of Ireland captains ahead of the 2026 season launch *(more on page 30)*

Mexico...a crunching tackle goes in on the opening weekend of the 2025-26 Liga MX Clausura season

Brazil...Memphis Depay celebrates after helping Corinthians defeat Flamengo 2-0 in the Brazilian Super Cup

Morocco...Brahim Diaz watches as his tame penalty is saved by Senegal keeper Edouard Mendy at the climax of the AFCON final *(more on page 76)*

Peru...Lionel Messi watches Alianza Lima celebrate during their 3-0 victory over Inter Miami in one of the MLS champions' pre-season friendlies *(more on page 84)*

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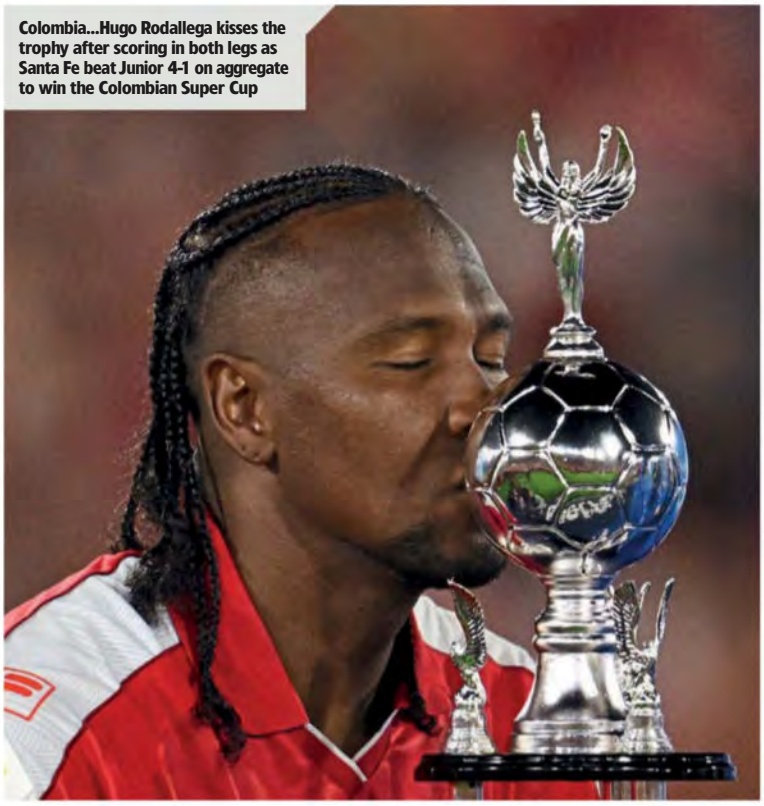
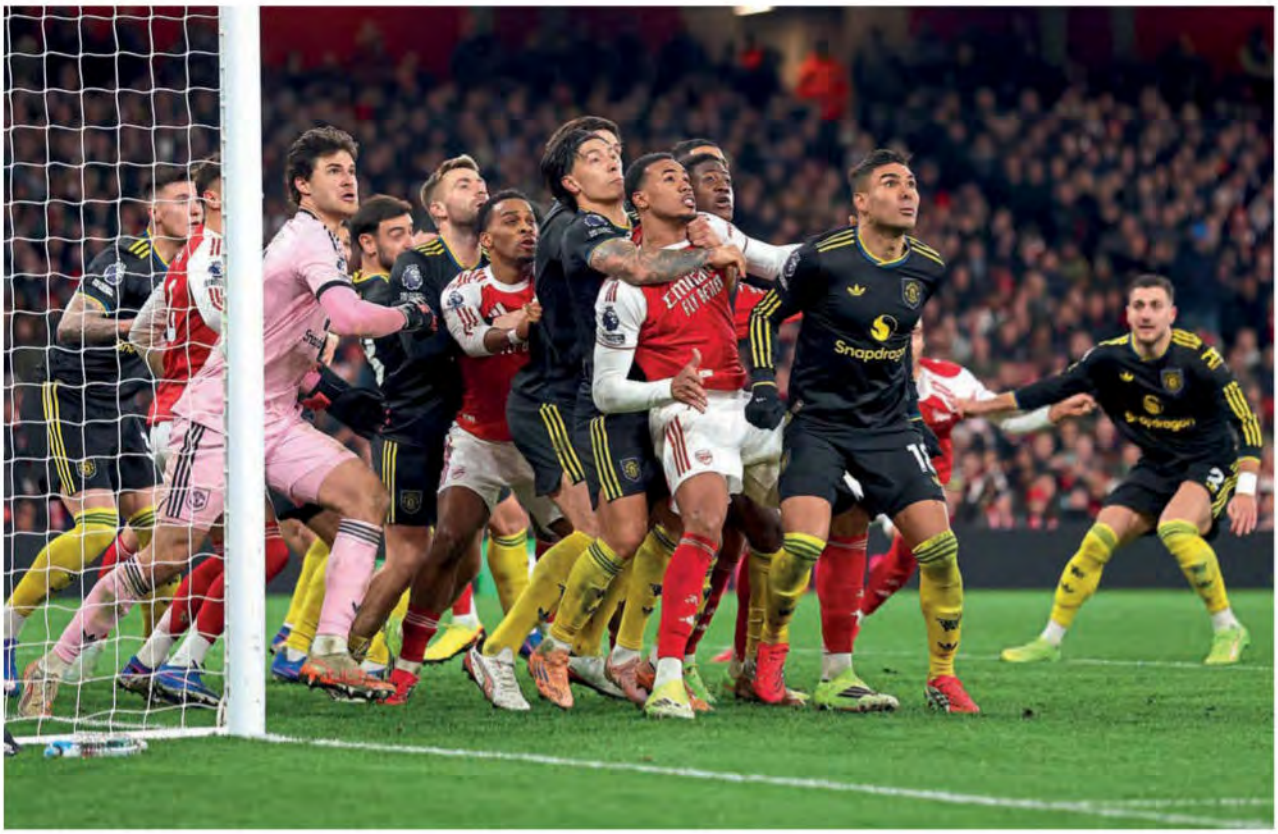


Colombia...Hugo Rodallega kisses the trophy after scoring in both legs as Santa Fe beat Junior 4-1 on aggregate to win the Colombian Super Cup

Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Are you not entertained?



Set-piece league... corners have had a massive influence on this season's Premier League

The Premier League is the most competitive league in the world. It's just not the most exciting league this season. Caution is more evident given the high stakes. Job insecurity amongst some coaches leads to safety-first tactics. Fatigue is an issue given the workload even with extensive rotation. And when will a winger consistently attack his full-back with a confident dribble and go outside them?

Entertainment, when it does arrive, comes in bursts. It can be seen in sudden link-ups between Jurrien Timber and Bukayo Saka at Arsenal, Florian Wirtz and Hugo Ekitike at Liverpool, Youri Tielemans and Morgan Rogers at Aston Villa, Rayan Cherki and Erling Haaland at Manchester City or Bryan Mbeumo and Bruno Fernandes at Manchester United. Bournemouth can often be a joy to watch in transition. Fulham are good value when Harry Wilson is within sight of goal. The creativity of Granit Xhaka and Enzo Le Fee has brought style and substance to Sunderland. Estevao is a trick and treat to behold when allowed out by Chelsea.

But fans deserve to be entertained more. They certainly pay enough.

I've covered every Premier League season since its inception in 1992, and the pulse hasn't quickened as frequently this season as in many previous iterations. Trips down memory lane can prove over-romantic strolls but there is no denying the illuminating beauty of past teams who graced our historic pitches and history books.

The Manchester United of Eric Cantona in 1993-94 and treble winners of 1998-99 were special. So was the Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney vintage of 2007-08. They held off Chelsea and Arsenal in a close race. The Arsenal Invincibles of 2003-04 were a charismatic collection of attacking musketeers, midfielders and defenders who loved a challenge in every sense. Jose Mourinho's Chelsea of 2004-05 were worthy special ones.

The 2018-19 title race between a Manchester City side inspired by Raheem Sterling and the Liverpool of Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane was thrilling. City won by a point, 98 to 97, and some of the football was bewitching. City, the previous season,

were superb, scoring a record 106 goals with Sergio Aguero unstoppable.

The simply brilliant rivalry between Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool and Pep Guardiola at City produced some of the most astonishing high-level performances and title races between genuine thoroughbreds. Maybe the current swirl of dissatisfaction is because Klopp and Guardiola raised expectations so high. Even an excellent Arsenal side cannot match those standards.

To assess this current season properly involves putting it into context first: it lacks the majesty of past seasons. It lacks a poster-boy. It lacks charisma. Where are the Cantonas, Agueros, Rooneys and Ronaldos? The two most important players in the Premier League are probably Gabriel and Declan Rice, giving Arsenal their backbone and belief. Exceptional players, but not great entertainers.

The game has become almost over-coached. Long throw-ins have come centre-stage. Arsenal, chasing a first Premier League title since the Invincibles, have been derided for their over-reliance on set-pieces. Their supporters don't really care about caustic critiques from rivals. They are just desperate to win the league. Grind it out, boys.

"Exceptional players but not entertainers"...title-chasing Arsenal's backbone, Gabriel and Declan Rice

VAR slows the flow and blocks the adrenalin channels. Technology was meant to end arguments. Instead it has made the sport angrier, the games longer and fuses shorter. The Premier League's pernickety approach to officiating, going forensic rather than focusing on simply catching the "clear and obvious", has crowds seething further. Varying degrees of cheating, ranging from time-wasting to tactical fouls and diving, contribute to a winter sport of discontent.

Fans deserve to be entertained more. They certainly pay enough

Some of the season's big hopes have not shone. Alexander Isak got injured, Viktor Gyokeres took time to settle in. Eberechi Eze struggles for game time. Injury claims others. The number of players missing through injury touched 100 in early February. Tottenham Hotspur are far less entertaining without James Maddison and Dejan Kulusevski. Whenever Jack Grealish is absent through injury the fun factor dips at Everton. How many players do you see play with a smile? Few. It's all about the result.

And fear. Players check their phones on returning to the dressing-room after games to see what fans are saying about them on social media. Mistakes gets hammered, sometimes viciously, leading to players becoming more inhibited the next time they play. Who takes risks in possession nowadays? Wirtz, Fernandes, Cherki, Saka and a few others. Not many.

Low blocks frustrate the more creative teams and supporters alike. Fans, individually and collectively, rail against the cost of match-going, changes to kick-off times and a sense of growing detachment with owners at clubs like Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United, even mild Fulham. Impatience fills the air at some grounds, and certainly on social media. Managers and players get called out if they don't quickly show appreciation to fans after a game. Societal tensions also spill into stadiums.

If some of the joy has gone, the jeopardy remains. It is a competitive league. Even the lightweights occasionally take a swing and bloody the nose of the heavyweights.

Wolverhampton Wanderers, who long looked doomed for the drop won 3-0 against West Ham who won 3-0 at Nottingham Forest who won 3-0 at Liverpool. The defending champions won by three goals against Newcastle United who won by three goals against Everton who won 1-0 at Manchester United playing the majority of the game with ten men. On it goes. United won at Arsenal who dream of that first title since 2004. Everyone's taking points off each other so a low tally is expected for the eventual winners. Mid-table teams have access to huge sums of broadcast money to strengthen their squad and occasionally embarrass the elite.

Yet a glance at European combat shows the Premier League dominating – five of England's six Champions League representatives finished in the top eight spots. That's not a reflection on the attractiveness of their football, merely that they are ready for battle from the relentless skirmishing of the Premier League. Paris Saint-Germain, Barcelona and Bodo/Glimt are more watchable. The Premier League is hyped by broadcasters, but go on fans' forums and a truer verdict is being reached: a decent season, a cut-throat one between teams, but not a classic.

Protests...West Ham fans have been among the teams to complain about their owners this season

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

World Cup boycott? Not likely

Calls to stay away from this summer's bonanza in the United States will fall on deaf ears

More boycott calls...for the second World Cup in a row there is talk of a boycott

Talk is cheap and, heading for major event time, sports boycott talk is even cheaper. Once again, the World Cup is being weaponised in the cause of human morality, just as it was ahead of the 2022 finals in Qatar.

Boycotts come in all different shapes and sizes. The modern world has seen a storm cloud of them, whether diplomatic or economic or agricultural. But the potential of a sporting boycott accrues so much traction because of the worldwide visibility of a specific concern.

International sporting boycotts generally fall into four categories: war and invasions (Afghanistan, Ukraine), racial injustice (apartheid South Africa), political recognition disputes (China/Taiwan, Israel/Palestine) and human rights. An international boycott can also be defined as a co-ordinated operation involving a multiplicity of nations.

This runs beyond the usual geopolitical snags of territorial rivalry, such as teams refusing to play a competitive match because of political disagreement or absence of diplomatic recognition. In football terms, FIFA, UEFA and the Asian Football Confederation have found a simple way around that: a match forfeit and points penalty. Job done.

A sports boycott is not a direct issue of security, either. No-one quibbles about national teams from states at war – or suffering internal disturbance or border battles – being ordered to play their home matches in far-off neutral venues; in 1992 the collapsing Yugoslavia was barred from the finals of the European Championship over security concerns that domestic fragmentation would spill over into terrorist statements on the streets of hosts Sweden.

Thus far, the World Cup has mostly escaped, with a notable exception in 1966. Then most African nations withdrew from qualifying in protest at the FIFA allocation of only one slot at the finals for Africa, Asia and Oceania combined. The boycott was rewarded with a separate single slot for Africa in 1970.

Brave tales are told, from a distance, of activist antagonism to the staging of the 1978 finals in Argentina but FIFA president Joao Havelange's far greater concern at the time was whether the military junta would have colour broadcast facilities in place. Johan Cruyff stayed away but that was personal after a frightening domestic attack rather than political.

Only three major event boycotts have disturbed the sporting firmament (setting aside the long-standing Asian antagonism to Israel). Two involve the

Olympic tit-for-tat of 1980 and 1984 when the United States and more than 60 other nations stayed away from the Moscow Games, provoking the absence of the Soviet Union and 14 allies from Los Angeles four years later. The other major boycott saw the sporting world turn South Africa into an international pariah over apartheid.

Two particular factors rendered South Africa vulnerable to sporting pressure, the first being its massive sporting pride. A second was the fact that its apartheid laws fed directly into domestic sport with racially segregated governing bodies, competitions and representative teams. In other words, the political situation could not be separated from sport. Even then, FIFA president Sir Stanley Rous tried hard to avoid the inevitable; his appeasement was one factor in Africa turning on him at the 1974 Congress, the only president voted out of office in FIFA's 122 years.

Europe has had its hiccups. Spain, on the orders of dictator Francisco Franco with civil war bitterness to the fore, refused to play the Soviet Union in the 1960 European Championship quarter-finals. Yet four years later pragmatism triumphed as Spain not only played host but beat the USSR in the final with the Generalissimo heading the VIP ranks at the Bernabeu.

In 1968, western European clubs forced UEFA to reorganise the draws for the opening round of its major club competitions in protest at the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Most of the eastern European clubs then withdrew in counter-protest. Ironically, the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup that season was ultimately won by Czechoslovakia's Slovan Bratislava.

UEFA's greatest political disruptor since the end of the Cold War has been Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, albeit eight years after President Vladimir Putin first annexed Crimea. Poland, Sweden and Czech Republic all insisted they would refuse to play Russian teams in European competition. UEFA and FIFA duly suspended Russia and ally Belarus from international competition, while UEFA also moved the 2022 Champions League final from Saint Petersburg to Paris and cancelled its Gazprom sponsorship.

> "We believe in the unifying power of football and in the global impact a World Cup can have. Our goal is to harness and strengthen this positive force, not to prevent it"
>
> Germany's football association rejects calls for a World Cup boycott

Later, in October 2023, UEFA was forced to scrap an attempt to reintegrate Russia back into competition via its youth teams after a backlash from around a dozen national associations.

FIFA has been content to allow UEFA to lead the way. In any case, FIFA's greatest care has always been the World Cup, which delivers almost all its income including the millions distributed among its 211 members duly beholden to keep re-electing their generous president. Here, as examined previously, is commercial justification for Gianni Infantino's sycophantic behaviour towards US President Donald Trump, as exemplified in the laughable peace prize that underlined the risible nonsense of that old incantation that sport has no connection with politics.

Infantino has also railed against the ban on Russia. "This ban has not achieved anything," he told *Sky News*. "It has just created more frustration and hatred" – apparently forgetting his earlier remarks that it could be concluded only by an end to hostilities.

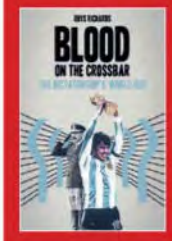
US tariff threats, its behaviour towards Venezuela and Greenland plus heavy-handed action in American cities have all raised alarms. But not significant enough to threaten the World Cup which, in any case, is also heading for Canada and Mexico. Ultimately, money talks. Or, even more than money if Germany's DFB is to be believed. As the DFB stated: "We believe in the unifying power of football and in the global impact a World Cup can have. Our goal is to harness and strengthen this positive force, not to prevent it."

So there. That is the stance of the world's largest sports organisation. Boycott, big or small? Forget it.

All of which prompts one intriguing question; how would today's political and sporting leaders have reacted to apartheid South Africa?

Historic sporting precedent...68 nations boycotted the Moscow Summer Olympics in 1980

BOOKS THIS MONTH



BLOOD ON THE CROSSBAR
By Rhys Richards
(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Blood on the Crossbar: The Dictatorship's World Cup is the definitive story of football's most controversial tournament: Argentina's 1978 World Cup. It was a competition that took place during a brutal military dictatorship, where thousands of citizens "disappeared", mothers protested on the streets and a national team's success was hijacked by the military.

THE MAKING OF THE FIFA WORLD CUP
By Jack Davies
(Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

The Making of the FIFA World Cup takes you on the ultimate journey through World Cup history. Telling the stories of 75 of the competition's most memorable and shocking moments, you'll be left in no doubt as to why the World Cup is sport's most-watched event. This brings you the pure, unfiltered excitement of the World Cup – in book form.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Mystifying negativity, experimental formations and retro tactics

A tactical review of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations

Given that just one goal was scored in normal time in the final four games of the Africa Cup of Nations, the temptation would be to think that not much has changed. This has always been a tournament noted for its caginess, especially in the latter stages. And to an extent that's not an unfair characterisation. But equally it would be wrong not to acknowledge that this was an unusually tactically diverse Cup of Nations and that certain teams, most notably Nigeria, played with an unusual degree of freedom.

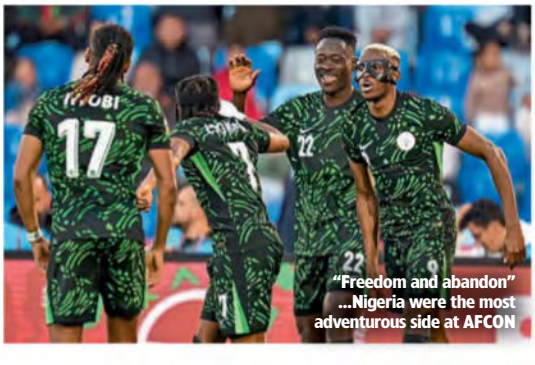
It's perhaps worth asking why the Cup of Nations has developed a reputation for being low-scoring. It's well-deserved: only two of the 14 tournaments since 2000 have averaged more than 2.5 goals per game, and in three of them it's been under two. That goes against a general trend across the club game in which football, certainly until five or six years ago, was becoming more attacking. An average of 2.7-2.8 goals per game is standard for the Premier League. It's true that club football tends to be more attacking than the international game, but the World Cup has averaged between 2.6 and 2.7 goals per game over its last three editions.

"Mystifyingly negative" ...Senegal's intelligent pragmatism defeated Egypt's negativity in the semi-final

In part, at least in the past, the issue has perhaps been the pitches. In Mali in 2002, when average goals per game was at a record low of 1.5, the playing surfaces were dreadful. That, though, was emphatically not the case in Morocco, where the pitches were uniformly excellent despite the persistent heavy rain. In part, the issue is the natural tendency of international coaches with limited time to prepare to play defensive football; far easier to set up a team to sit deep, absorb pressure and look to strike on the break or via a set-play than to create a cohesive attacking unit. There is a psychological aspect to that as well: lose a game on penalties and you might be considered unfortunate; lose 5-0 and the humiliation will reverberate far more than in the club game in which few individual fixtures carry the same weight as a game at an international tournament.

> There is a strange and counter-productive cult of negativity about certain sides, an unwillingness to trust their undoubted ability

But there is something else going on. Tunisia opted for a back three against Nigeria in the group stage, something they had only previously done in a friendly against Brazil; this was Sami Trabelsi's way of playing to contain an opponent. Against this Nigeria at that stage, it felt like overkill. Nigeria raced into a 3-0 lead, but Tunisia, the pressure lifted, played properly and scored twice in the final 16 minutes. That might have been a lesson to trust themselves, but they did not learn it. In the last 16, they preferred to scrap and spoil even after a crushingly tedious Mali were reduced to ten men by the 26th-minute dismissal of Woyo Coulibaly. They drew 1-1 and lost on penalties.



"Freedom and abandon" ...Nigeria were the most adventurous side at AFCON

Egypt were mystifyingly negative in their semi-final. Morocco, perhaps feeling the pressure of being hosts and not having won the Cup of Nations for 50 years, also played with paranoia in the semi-final and the final. There is a strange and counter-productive cult of negativity about certain sides, an unwillingness to trust their undoubted ability and to actually just play the game. That's not to say every side has to attack, but there is a difference between a balanced counter-attacking approach such as that Egypt produced in beating Ivory Coast in the quarter-final and the anti-football of Tunisia.

Set against that, Nigeria played with a freedom and abandon they have not shown at a major tournament since the 1990s. Their use of Victor Osimhen and Akor Adams as a front two was unusual, but it worked, with Ademola Lookman as a No.10, Alex Iwobi as a deep-lying playmaker, Wilfred Ndidi as the defensive midfielder and Frank Onyeka performing a vital role in filling the gaps. Width was offered by two attacking full-backs in Bright Osayi-Samuel and Bruno Onyemaechi. It's an old-fashioned way of playing but, as Leeds have shown, re-invoking tactics that opponents have forgotten how to deal with can work. With different refereeing and better penalties, it might even have brought a place in the final.

But the champions were Senegal, who played with great intelligence and pragmatism. "We were patient and we knew that any kind of mistake would be punished," Sadio Mane said after the semi-final win over Egypt, "so we tried to be compact and to press as soon as we lost the ball and put them under big pressure and not to lose easy balls."

In truth, that was how they had played against Mali in the quarter-final and against Morocco in the final. Don't overcommit, don't concede counters, and assume that, with a midfield and forward line that talented, a goal will come from somewhere. And in a tournament in which so many teams were afraid to attack, that was good enough.

Turn to page 76 for our full 2025 Africa Cup of Nations finals review

Hakim ZIYECH

(Wydad Casablanca)

Three months on from joining Wydad, Ziyech finally made his debut for the Moroccan giants in a CAF Confederation Cup victory over Maniema Union of the DR Congo.

Signing a player with 64 caps for the national team and a UEFA Champions League winners' medal was a huge coup for both the club and the league at a time when Moroccan football is on the rise. Now 32, Ziyech has struggled to settle since leaving Chelsea in 2023, spending time at Galatasaray and Qatari outfit Al Duhail.

The Amsterdam-born playmaker returned to his parents' homeland in an attempt to force his way back into the national team set-up. The AFCON finals came too soon, but the World Cup squad remains a target.

Antonio ARENA
(Roma)
Born in Sydney but with caps for Italy's youth sides, the 16-year-old striker scored with his first touch for Roma in a cup match after joining the Serie A side from second-tier Pescara.

Ali AHMED
(Norwich City)
The Canada winger has been an instant hit in the English Championship after signing from Vancouver Whitecaps, scoring two goals and setting up two others in his first three games.

Ryan FRASER
(Western Sydney Wanderers)
After leaving Southampton for Australia "to do something different", the 31-year-old Scotland winger scored in his first two A-League games, including a stoppage-time winner on his debut.

Maximilian IBRAHIMOVIC
(Ajax)
In January, the son of Zlatan left one of his father's former clubs for another, joining Ajax on loan from Milan. Ibra Junior, 19, is a winger with two caps for Sweden's Under-19s.

Alex FREEMAN
(Villarreal)
One of *World Soccer's* 50 wonderkids to watch in 2026, Freeman, 21, joined Villarreal from Orlando City in January. The 2025 MLS Young Player of the Year is a real contender to start for the United States at the World Cup.

RAYAN
(Bournemouth)
Another of our wonderkids from last month's issue, and one of two players on that list – alongside Spurs' new left-back Souza – to leave Brazil for the Premier League. Rayan scored 20 goals for Vasco da Gama in 2025.

"Certainly one of the best [with] what he's done with us at the age of 15. Me personally, I haven't seen it before. Only with a guy who used to play in Barcelona, but maybe not even that"

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta is glowing in his praise of Gunners wonderkid Max Dowman after the teenager signed his first professional contract with the club, which will come into effect when he turns 17 in December

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

3
Asian Under-23 Championship titles won by Japan, a competition record, after they beat China 4-0 in the 2026 final in Saudi Arabia.

€400m
Reported value of Spanish outfit Sevilla, with their former defender Sergio Ramos leading a bid to take over his old club with the backing of investors.

16
Spanish Super Cups won by Barcelona after they beat arch-rivals Real Madrid 3-2 in this year's final, which took place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

1
Arsenal became the winners of the first-ever FIFA Women's Champions Cup by defeating South American champions Corinthians 3-2 at the Emirates (more on page 72).

£36.3m
Reported fee paid by Flamengo to sign Lucas Paqueta from West Ham United, a record fee for a Brazilian club, seven years after he left the Rio outfit for Milan.

Back home ...Lucas Paqueta

1
Victories for Paris FC over their neighbours Paris Saint-Germain after they knocked the Ligue 1 champions out of the French Cup. The two sides had only met twice before this season, back in 1978.

Estadio Monumental ...River Plate's Buenos Aires ground is set for an upgrade

101,000
Proposed capacity of River Plate's Estadio Monumental, with plans in place to develop the historic stadium to make it the world's second-largest club ground after Barcelona's Camp Nou.

18
Months remaining on former England winger Raheem Sterling's Chelsea contract when it was terminated early in January.

3
Assists by 16-year-old Sydney FC winger Akol Akon in his side's 4-1 A-League victory over local rivals Western Sydney Wanderers.

12
Days that Gabon's national team was suspended for by its own government following their early exit from AFCON, before the ban was lifted on January 13.

$100,000
Fine handed out by CAF, as well as a five-match ban, to Senegal head coach Pape Thiaw for instructing his players to leave the field during the AFCON 2025 final against Morocco (more on page 76).

7
Deadline-day signings in the Premier League – the fewest in the history of the January transfer window.

£6m
Reported fee paid by Verona for Hibernian striker Kieron Bowie, a record sale for the Edinburgh club, as the 23-year-old becomes the latest Scot to move to Serie A.

9
Clubs that will start the 2026 Chinese Super League season on minus points after several teams were punished following an investigation into "match-fixing, gambling, and corruption".

7
Months that Xabi Alonso lasted as Real Madrid manager before exiting the club in January.

Exit...the Spanish Super Cup was Alonso's last game in charge of Real

86,000
International transfers that were completed in men and women's football in 2025 – the highest figure ever recorded. In total, the combined transfer fees were over $10 billion, another new record.

£60m
Fee agreed by Liverpool and Rennes for 20-year-old French defender Jeremy Jacquet, who will move to Anfield this summer.

£9,357
Figure paid out by Manchester City players to their suppporters to reimburse them for their tickets in the side's 3-1 loss away to Bodo/Glimt in the Champions League.

Apologetic...Manchester City players after their defeat in Norway

2027
Year that Karim Benzema's contract will run to at new club Al Hilal. The French striker signed a one-and-a-half-year deal with Al Hilal after joining the club from Saudi Pro League rivals Al Ittihad.

46
Canada caps won by centre-back Steven Vitoria, who announced his retirement. His clubs included Porto, Benfica and Boavista.

1
Faroese players to feature for a Serie A club after Faroe Islands defender Andrias Edmundsson joined Verona from Wisla Plock.

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"It is likely that repetitive head impacts, sustained by heading the ball while playing football, contributed to the CTE"

An inquest into the death of former Scotland centre-back Gordon McQueen concludes that repeatedly heading footballs contributed to the chronic traumatic encephalopathy brain disease that he suffered from

OBITUARIES

Mladen BARTOLOVIC
(1977-2026)
Bosnia & Herzegovina winger who switched from basketball to football in his teens with Segesta and spent most of his career at Cibalia Vinkovci. Also played for Dinamo Zagreb, with whom he won the 2004 Croatian Cup, as well as for Hajduk Split, NK Zagreb, Germany's Saarbrucken and Iran's Foolad. Won 17 caps for the national team between 2003 and 2008.

Giancarlo CELLA
(1940-2026)
Italian wing-half whose early promise with Torino lifted him into the Italy team that came fourth on home soil at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Also played for Catania, Atalanta, Internazionale, Novara and Piacenza.

Rolland COURBIS
(1953-2026)
French defender who won league titles in Greece and at home with Olympiacos and Monaco respectively, before earning greater fame as a coach and then media analyst. Courbis played for hometown club Marseille, as well as Ajaccio, Toulon, Sochaux and Monaco, then coached Bordeaux, Montpellier, Rennes, Ajaccio and Lens, as well as leading Marseille to the UEFA Cup final in 1999.

***Adieu, Rolland*...Marseille supporters say goodbye to their former manager Rolland Courbis**

Ranjit DAS
(1932-2026)
A prominent goalkeeper in East Pakistan, the province of Pakistan that became Bangladesh in 1971. After independence, Das played a prominent role in establishing the Bangladesh Football Federation and in helping to select the country's national team for their first-ever international match in July 1973.

Boris IGNATYEV
(1940-2026)
Graduate from the Spartak Moscow academy who played in midfield for Volga Gorky and Dynamo Makhachkala, before embarking on a respected coaching career. Led the Soviet Union to victory at the European Under-18 Championship in 1988 then replaced Oleg Romantsev as head coach of the senior Russia national team in 1996. Later served as vice-president of Torpedo Moscow from 2013 to 2018.

Nicolas GIANI
(1986-2026)
Centre-back and graduate of the Inter academy who spent much of his career in Serie B. Star of the SPAL side that achieved back-to-back promotions up to Serie A between 2015 and 2017.

Ali HASSAN
(1964-2026)
Defensive midfielder who won five caps for Mozambique between 1989 and the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations finals. Played his club football in Portugal for Sporting, Vitoria Setubal, Amora, Academico de Viseu and Torres Novas.

Marcel LONCLE
(1936-2026)
A hero of the Rennes team that won the French Cup in 1965, the club's first major trophy, having scored their second goal in the 3-1 replay defeat of Sedan in the final in the old Parc des Princes. Loncle made his name as an amateur with Angers and was initially reluctant to turn professional. He left for Rennes in 1962, scoring 38 goals in 156 appearances between 1962 and 1966. He played for France at the 1960 Olympics in Rome and then twice for the senior national team.

Eddie McCREADIE
(1940-2026)
Glasgow-born McCreadie was a pioneering, overlapping left-back who starred at Chelsea in the 1960s. Manager Tommy Docherty signed him for £5,000 from East Stirlingshire in 1962 after having gone to check out another player. McCreadie proved a perfect support for the attacking effervescence of Charlie Cooke and Peter Osgood. In the 1965 League Cup final first leg he scored a stunning solo goal in a 3-2 win over Leicester City, before a goalless return secured Chelsea's first major knockout trophy. Five years later McCreadie helped Chelsea to victory over Leeds United in a notorious replayed FA Cup final.

Chelsea left-back... Eddie McCreadie

McCreadie made 410 appearances for the Blues, before retiring in 1973. He took over as manager of a then-struggling Chelsea in 1975 and was powerless to prevent the club from being relegated, but rebuilt the team and had them back in the First Division by 1977. He walked away after a falling out with chairman Brian Mears, with his only other managerial spells coming in the North American Soccer League with Memphis Rogues and Cleveland Force.

McCreadie played 23 times for Scotland, including the famous British Home Championship victory over World Cup holders England at Wembley in 1967.

Jose MINGORANCE
(1938-2026)
The first Cordoba player to be called up for Spain, Mingorance's national team debut lasted only the opening half hour of a humiliating 6-2 defeat to Scotland at the Bernabeu in 1963. A star of the Cordoba team in the 1960s, the centre-back later went on to play five years for Espanyol before returning for one last season at Cordoba in 1970-71.

"I will carry your wisdom in my steps and your strength in my heart. Forever my hero"

Brighton Women's head coach Dario Vidosic pays tribute to his father Rado

Ahmed MOUJAHID
(1950-2026)
Africa Cup of Nations champion with Morocco in 1976 who died during the country's hosting of the recent finals. Domestically, the midfielder won the national title with Wydad in 1977.

Mukhsin MUKHAMADIEV
(1966-2026)
Tajik-Russian player and coach. Versatile forward who starred for clubs across the Soviet Union, and later Russia, Turkey, Austria and Central Asia. Notable spells were with CSKA Pamir Dushanbe, Lokomotiv Moscow and Spartak Moscow, with whom he won the Russian league title in 1994. He also scored for both the Tajikistan and Russia national teams during the 1990s. Later coached Vityaz Podolsk, the Tajikistan national team, Istiklol and was sporting director of Rubin Kazan.

Lucien MULLER
(1934-2026)
Muller (formally Muller-Schmidt) was nicknamed the "Little Kopa" – high praise for an inside-forward and later midfielder who played in the same era as Raymond Kopa and Just Fontaine with both Reims and the France national team.

Muller began with hometown club Bischwiller in Alsace then progressed via Strasbourg and Toulouse to Reims with whom he won two French league titles. Real Madrid bought him in 1962 to replace Juventus-bound Luis del Sol and he was their best player in defeat to Internazionale in the 1964 European Cup final. A year later Muller became the only Frenchman to have played for both Spanish giants when he joined Barcelona with whom he won the Fairs Cup in 1966 and Spanish Cup in 1968.

Later Muller coached Castellon, Burgos, Real Zaragoza, Barcelona, Mallorca and Monaco with whom he won the French Cup. Muller scored three goals in 16 games for France and was a member of the World Cup squad in 1966, but did not play in England.

Howard RILEY
(1938-2026)
Outside-right star for Leicester City in the 1960s, scoring the decisive goal in their two-legged League Cup final defeat of Stoke City in 1964.

Leicester City hero... Howard Riley

FA chairman... Lord Triesman

Nicola SALERNO
(1956-2026)
Former sporting director who worked for a number of Italian clubs including Messina, Catania, Cagliari, Foggia and Salernitana before moving to England. Salerno spent one turbulent year at Leeds United under the club's then-owner Massimo Celino, then later served as an advisor to Watford, before returning to Italy as sporting director of Palermo and then Brescia.

Dede SULAEMAN
(1956-2026)
Striker or winger with Persija Jakarta and Indonesia's national team in the 1970s and 1980s. Winning 36 caps for Team Garuda, the most famous of his nine international goals was in a defeat by South Korea in the qualifying play-offs for the 1986 World Cup.

TATO
(1961-2026)
A star of Fluminense during one of the most successful periods of the Brazilian club's history, playing over 200 games and helping the team to win three Rio State Championships in a row between 1983 and 1985, as well as the national title in 1984. It was during this period that the left-winger won all three of his Brazil caps, including the 2-0 friendly defeat to England at the Maracana.

A move to Europe and Spanish side Elche in 1989 did not work out, and he quickly returned to Brazil, winning his second national championship with Vasco da Gama. Later played for Sport Recife, Santos, Gremio and Coritiba before retiring in 1993.

David TRIESMAN
(1943-2026)
Lord Triesman left a significant legacy across British politics and sport. His career spanned across government and academia, but he became a public figure as the first independent chairman of the Football Association in 2008. Triesman transitioned the FA from a traditional "blazers' club" into a more corporate, streamlined entity. He was a tireless advocate for reform, who challenged the murky world of FIFA politics and helped to lead England's ultimately vain bid to host the 2018 World Cup.

Rado VIDOSIC
(1961-2026)
Croatian-Australian coach who worked for a number of A-League clubs over a 20-year coaching career before moving to the UK as women's and girls' head of coaching for Brighton. His son, Dario, is head coach of the Seagulls' women's side.

Father and son coaches...Dario and his father Rado Vidosic together at Wellington Phoenix in 2017

Tommy WRIGHT
(1944-2026)
Liverpool-born right-back who joined Everton as a schoolboy. He made 374 appearances for his only senior club and was a key figure in the team that won the 1966 FA Cup and 1970 First Division title. Weeks later he played for England at the 1970 World Cup finals, earning the admiration of Pele among other opponents for his positioning and tackling. Wright won 11 caps before injury forced his retirement in 1973.

Everton defender...Tommy Wright

Benjaminas ZELKEVICIUS
(1944-2026)
Lithuanian forward who later managed the national team in three separate spells, from 1990 to 1991, 1995 to 1997 then 2001 to 2003.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Jamie Evans

"I will carry Manchester United with me throughout my entire life. It is not time to say goodbye; there are many more memories to create during the next four months. We still have a lot to fight for"

Manchester United midfielder Casemiro reveals that he will leave Old Trafford when his contract expires this summer

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

NANI

The former Portugal winger came out of retirement to sign for Kazakh club **Aktobe**. Nani, 39, had hung up his boots in December 2024 after last playing for Estrela da Amadora.

Oleksandr ZINCHENKO

Arsenal brought an early end to the Ukrainian's loan at Nottingham Forest and sold him to Dutch club **Ajax**. In total the versatile left-back/midfielder played 150 Premier League games.

Mario BALOTELLI

In the latest chapter of a long and nomadic career, the ex-Italy striker joined **Al Ittifaq** in the UAE. Now 35, Balotelli had been a free agent since leaving Genoa last summer.

Edin DZEKO

The veteran striker, who will turn 40 in March, left Serie A side Fiorentina to join **Schalke** in Germany's second tier, the tenth club of his career, and scored on his debut in January.

GABRIEL Barbosa

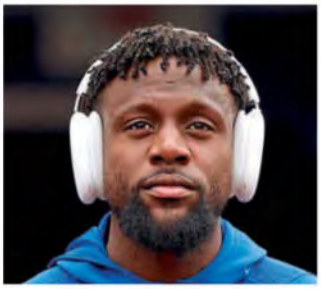
Santos now have two of their most expensive exports back at the club, with "Gabigol" signing on loan from Cruzeiro to join Neymar in the Brazilian side's attacking line.

Ciro IMMOBILE

Despite being linked with former club Pescara (more on page 24), the veteran Italian striker joined **Paris FC**, one of five new signings for the ambitious Ligue 1 club.

Kurt ZOUMA

The ex-France and West Ham United defender is looking for a new club after leaving **CFR Cluj**. Zouma, 31, played just four games in Romania after signing for Cluj last September.



Divock ORIGI

Another ex-Premier League player now without a club, Origi's contract at **Milan** was terminated in January. The Belgian's last game was on loan at Nottingham Forest in April 2024.

Mohamed Kader MEITE

Tipped for an exciting future, the 18-year-old forward became the latest player to head for the Saudi Pro League, joining **Al Hilal** from Rennes for a reported €30 million.

Brian MADJO

Born in England but raised in Luxembourg, the striker has three senior caps for the latter but is now an England U17 regular. **Aston Villa** paid £10m to sign him from Metz.

Alvaro FIDALGO

The midfielder departed America for **Real Betis** after five successful years in Mexico, but not before claiming a Mexican passport with an eye on playing for *El Tri* at the World Cup.

Mamadou SAKHO

The former PSG, Liverpool, Crystal Palace and France central defender announced his retirement at the age of 35. Sakho's last club was Georgian outfit **Torpedo Kutaisi**.

"The club and I have decided in good and constructive discussions that our successful time together will come to an end in the summer. As I said earlier, it is also the right time for me to start a new chapter"

Germany midfielder Leon Goretzka announces that he will depart Bayern Munich on the expiration of his contract this summer

JANUARY 2026 TRANSFER WINDOW

BIGGEST TRANSFERS

£62.5m	**Antoine SEMENYO**	*(Bournemouth to Manchester City)*
£43m	**Jorgen STRAND LARSEN**	*(Wolves to Crystal Palace)*
£36.3m	**Lucas PAQUETA**	*(West Ham United to Flamengo)*
£35m	**Brennan JOHNSON**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Crystal Palace)*
£34.6m	**Conor GALLAGHER**	*(Atletico Madrid to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£33.3m	**Ademola LOOKMAN**	*(Atalanta to Atletico Madrid)*
£30m	**Lorenzo LUCCA**	*(Udinese to Napoli)**
£27m	**Oscar BOBB**	*(Manchester City to Fulham)*
£26m	**Mohamed Kader MEITE**	*(Rennes to Al Hilal)*
£25.9m	**George ILENIKHENA**	*(Monaco to Al Ittihad)*
£25.2m	**Taty CASTELLANOS**	*(Lazio to West Ham United)*
£24.7m	**RAYAN**	*(Vasco da Gama to Bournemouth)*
£24.3m	**Matteo GUENDOUZI**	*(Lazio to Fenerbahce)*
£23.5m	**GERSON**	*(Zenit to Cruzeiro)*
£20m	**Saimon BOUABRE**	*(Neom to Al Hilal)*
£20m	**Marc GUEHI**	*(Crystal Palace to Manchester City)*
£19.1m	**Robinio VAZ**	*(Marseille to Roma)*
£19m	**Giacomo RASPADORI**	*(Atletico Madrid to Atalanta)*
£18.3m	**Tammy ABRAHAM**	*(Besiktas to Aston Villa)*
£18.3m	**PABLO**	*(Gil Vicente to West Ham United)*
£18.2m	**Abdoul KONE**	*(Reims to RB Leipzig)*
£17.5m	**Nilson ANGULO**	*(Anderlecht to Sunderland)*
£17.4m	**GIOVANE**	*(Verona to Napoli)*
£15.6m	**JHON JHON**	*(Red Bull Bragantino to Zenit)*
£14.2m	**Luis GUILHERME**	*(West Ham United to Sporting)*
£13.8m	**Rodrigo MENDOZA**	*(Elche to Atletico Madrid)*
£13.2m	**Rodrigo DE PAUL**	*(Atletico Madrid to Inter Miami)**
£13.2m	**Youssef EN-NESYRI**	*(Fenerbahce to Al Ittihad)*
£13m	**Rudy MATONDO**	*(Auxerre to Paris FC)*
£13m	**SOUZA**	*(Santos to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£13m	**Kenneth TAYLOR**	*(Ajax to Lazio)*
£12.2m	**OH Hyeon-gyu**	*(Genk to Besiktas)*
£11.3m	**Petar RATKOV**	*(Red Bull Salzburg to Lazio)*
£11.2m	**Tammy ABRAHAM**	*(Roma to Besiktas)**
£11.2m	**Ismael KONE**	*(Marseille to Sassuolo)*
£11m	**German BERTERAME**	*(Monterrey to Inter Miami)*
£10.4m	**Alex TOTH**	*(Ferencvaros to Bournemouth)*

**Loan made permanent*

SELECTED OTHER DEALS

Loan	**Simon ADINGRA**	*(Sunderland to Monaco)*
£8.7m	**ALYSSON**	*(Gremio to Aston Villa)*
£7m	**Adam ARMSTRONG**	*(Southampton to Wolves)*
Undisc.	**Karim BENZEMA**	*(Al Ittihad to Al Hilal)*
Loan	**Facundo BUONANOTTE**	*(Brighton to Leeds United)*
Loan	**Joao CANCELO**	*(Al Hilal to Barcelona)*
Loan	**Diego COPPOLA**	*(Brighton to Paris FC)*
Loan	**Axel DISASI**	*(Chelsea to West Ham United)*
Loan	**Claudio ECHEVERRI**	*(Manchester City to Girona)*
Loan	**ENDRICK**	*(Real Madrid to Lyon)*
Loan	**Romain ESSE**	*(Crystal Palace to Coventry City)*
Loan	**Wout FAES**	*(Leicester City to Monaco)*
Loan	**Niclas FULLKRUG**	*(West Ham United to Milan)*
£8.7m	**Kaye FURO**	*(Club Brugge to Brentford)*
Loan	**Tyrique GEORGE**	*(Chelsea to Everton)*
Loan	**Angel GOMES**	*(Marseille to Wolves)*
Loan	**Brajan GRUDA**	*(Brighton to RB Leipzig)*
Loan	**Evann GUESSAND**	*(Aston Villa to Crystal Palace)*
Loan	**Jack HARRISON**	*(Leeds United to Fiorentina)*
Loan	**Arnaud KALIMUENDO**	*(Nottingham Forest to Eintracht Frankfurt)*
Undisc.	**N'Golo KANTE**	*(Al Ittihad to Fenerbahce)*
Loan	**Noa LANG**	*(Napoli to Galatasaray)*
Loan	**Lorenzo LUCCA**	*(Napoli to Nottingham Forest)*
Loan	**Douglas LUIZ**	*(Juventus to Aston Villa)*
Loan	**Daniel MALDINI**	*(Atalanta to Lazio)*
Loan	**Donyell MALEN**	*(Aston Villa to Roma)*
Loan	**Neal MAUPAY**	*(Marseille to Sevilla)*
Loan	**Ethan NWANERI**	*(Arsenal to Marseille)*
£500k	**Stefan ORTEGA**	*(Manchester City to Nottingham Forest)*
Free	**Allan SAINT-MAXIMIN**	*(Club America to Lens)*
Loan	**Manor SOLOMON**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Fiorentina)*
Loan	**Marc-Andre TER STEGEN**	*(Barcelona to Girona)*
£3.9m	**Quinten TIMBER**	*(Feyenoord to Marseille)*
£2m	**Adama TRAORE**	*(Fulham to West Ham United)*
Loan	**Elye WAHI**	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Nice)*
Loan	**James WARD-PROWSE**	*(West Ham to Burnley)*

Instant impact... Manchester City's Antoine Semenyo

Fenerbahce new boy...Matteo Guendouzi won the Turkish Super Cup on his debut

Back in Italy... Giacomo Raspadori spent just six months at Atletico Madrid

6 of the best January transfers

Jamie Evans on some of the more intriguing moves from the January transfer window

1 Lorenzo INSIGNE

Toronto FC to Pescara

Pescara supporters, watching their side rooted to the bottom of Serie B, would be forgiven for getting nostalgic about the 2011-12 season when they won the Serie B title with three future Italy internationals in their side. Now, one of them has returned in an attempt to rescue them.

Insigne was at the start of his career, on loan from Napoli, when he scored 18 goals in 37 games in Pescara's greatest season to earn the Serie B Footballer of the Year award. This time around, he won't have Ciro Immobile alongside him in attack or Marco Verratti behind him in midfield, although the latter is a co-owner of the club.

The 34-year-old, who was a free agent after four years in MLS with Toronto FC, joined Pescara with the team six points adrift of safety in Italy's second tier.

2 Lucas PAQUETA

West Ham United to Flamengo

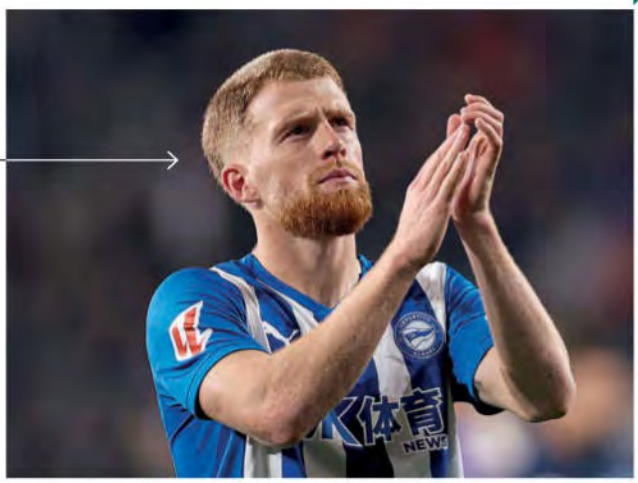
According to *Transfermarkt*, Brazilian clubs spent over €200m in the window, third only to the Premier League and Serie A, and, in Paqueta, Flamengo have signed a player who not so long ago was lighting up the English top flight.

The Brazilian has re-joined a club that is quite different from the one he left seven years ago. State, national and continental champions in 2025, Flamengo are on the verge of becoming a South American super club, one that has a squad of internationals, a promising young manager in Filipe Luis and an expectation of defending their titles in 2026.

If Paqueta sees out his four-year contract, the midfielder will play at the next Club World Cup in 2029, where Flamengo will be eyeing the trophy.

3 Carlos VICENTE

Alaves to Birmingham City



A little further down *Transfermarkt's* list of the highest-spending leagues in January is the EFL Championship at over €55.5m. To put that into context, that's more than the second-tier clubs of Italy, Germany, Spain and France put together. Leading the spending were Birmingham City who, after splashing out over £10m in the summer, splurged a further £15m.

Having hit ten goals in all comps this season, including one against Real Madrid, Vicente would normally head to one of the big Spanish sides. But with Championship clubs' ability to spend boosted by the trickle down of Premier League riches, plus the determination of ambitious owners to reach the promised land, Blues were able to get their man. If he takes them up, it will be money well spent.

4 DRO Fernandez

Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain

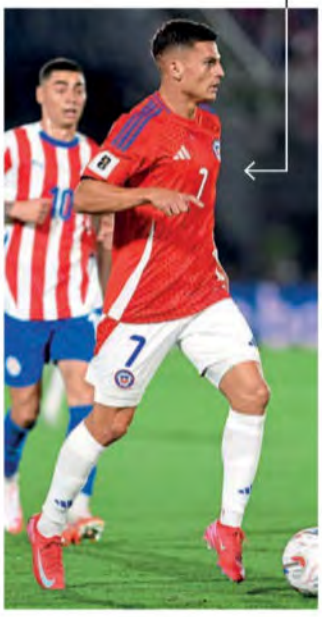
The most controversial transfer of the January window was probably Dro joining PSG in a transfer worth around €8m – much to the annoyance of Barcelona's club president Joan Laporta: "It has been an unpleasant situation," he told *Catalunya Radio*. "We had agreed on a different solution for when he turned 18."

A promising midfielder, Dro graduated from *La Masia* and was given his senior debut by head coach Hansi Flick in September. "I put a lot of effort in the young players and helping them improve but there are a lot of people around them," grumbled the German after Dro's departure.

Unsurprisingly for a Barcelona youth product, Dro is a technically gifted midfielder with nimble footwork, and should fit right in at the Parc des Princes.

5 Lucas CEPEDA

Colo-Colo to Elche



Selected by Tim Vickery as one of *World Soccer's* wonderkids to watch in 2025, Cepeda has come a long way in a short space of time. A little over two years ago, the winger was playing in Chile's second tier for Santiago Wanderers. He was snapped up by Colo-Colo for the 2024 campaign and, after two positive seasons at Chile's most successful club, which saw him become an established international, he has now joined one of La Liga's most entertaining sides.

Last summer, offers from Southampton and River Plate for Cepeda reportedly fell through, allowing him to see out the season in Chile.

A direct dribbler, comfortable on either flank, with a powerful left foot, the 23-year-old will add plenty of punch to his new team's attack.

6 Suleman SANI

AS Trencin to RB Leipzig

Given Leipzig's brilliant recent track record for signing young, exciting African wingers, Sani's is a name worth remembering. Last summer, the Red Bull club picked up Yan Diomande from Leganes, and the Ivory Coast starlet is already attracting interest from Europe's biggest clubs. This move suggests that the East Germans have started succession planning.

Just two years ago, the 19-year-old was still playing back home for Akwa United, but was simply too good for the Nigerian top flight and moved to Slovakian outfit AS Trencin. At both those clubs the Nigeria Under-20 international was involved in relegation battles, so Leipzig will be the first club he has played for that are competing near the top of the league.

A stocky, powerful dribbler, his explosive finishing off either foot is reminiscent of another January mover, Antoine Semenyo.

Edoardo Bove

Promising Italian midfielder is ready to reignite his career after suffering a cardiac arrest during a game

The former Roma midfielder Edoardo Bove, who suffered a cardiac arrest during a Serie A match last season, wants to repay the faith that Watford have shown in him by giving him the chance to resurrect his career.

Unable to play in his home country because he has been fitted with a defibrillator, the 23-year-old Italian has joined the Championship club on a five-and-a-half-year deal.

His move to England, where no such restrictions apply, has allowed the ex-Italy Under-21 international to return to action after more than a year out of the game.

"I've been eager to get back on the pitch," he said. "From day one, Watford have given me the best possible conditions to take this important step in my career.

"I'm excited to play and can't wait to show my gratitude for the trust that's been placed in me."

In December 2024, Bove collapsed during a game between Fiorentina, where he was on loan, and Internazionale at the Stadio Artemio Franchi. The match was suspended – and eventually postponed – as he received life-saving treatment on the pitch. Twelve days later, he was discharged from hospital having been fitted with an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD).

In Italy, competitive sport is prohibited for anyone who undergoes this procedure. Christian Eriksen, then an Inter player, faced the same obstacle after collapsing while playing for Denmark at Euro 2020. The former Tottenham Hotspur midfielder returned to England to play for Brentford and then Manchester United, and is now in Germany with Wolfsburg.

In an interview last year with the Italian newspaper *Corriere dello Sport*, Bove revealed how supportive Eriksen had been.

"I was in touch with him in the early days," he said. "We have something in common, even if we don't know each other personally. I feel close to him and I'm happy that he found another team."

Comeback trail ...Edoardo Bove hasn't played since December 2024

Bove has lent his name to new legislation in Italy aimed at reducing the number of lives lost to cardiac emergencies. "The Bove Law" will make first-aid courses mandatory in schools and in certain professions.

Speaking at its presentation in November, he said: "The goal is to get back to playing as soon as possible. I think it will happen soon, even if I don't know where or when."

> **In December 2024, Bove collapsed during a game between Fiorentina and Internazionale at the Stadio Artemio Franchi**

His move to Watford, who are owned by the Italian Pozzo family, took months of work. Sporting director Gianluca Nani and his assistant, the former Switzerland, West Ham United and Napoli midfielder Valon Behrami, knew that the player would be on several clubs' radar.

"It's a testament to the relationship we've built with him," Behrami said. "Edoardo is a top, proven talent and he's here to help us to fulfil the owner's objective, which is to challenge for a return to the Premier League."

The deal went through after Bove reached a settlement with Roma to terminate his contract, which had more than two years to run. Continuing his career meant severing ties with his hometown club, for whom he had played since the age of ten. He became a first-team regular under Jose Mourinho, and the Portuguese was a big fan of Bove's style of play.

"He bites and nips at your heels," said Mourinho of Bove back in January 2023. "He works, he is intelligent, he is learning and makes me so happy."

With the Portuguese coach at the helm, Bove was a Conference League winner in 2022. He also scored the goal that took Roma to the following year's Europa League final.

At the end of last season, he returned to the Stadio Olimpico to thank the club's fans for their support during his recovery. The ovation he received moved him to tears.

Greg Whelan

Kazuyoshi Miura

The story behind the world's oldest active footballer, as the former Japan forward embarks on his 41st season as a professional

It was in 2017 that Kazuyoshi Miura etched his name into the footballing record books, first by surpassing Sir Stanley Matthews as the world's oldest professional footballer, and soon after becoming the world's oldest goalscorer too. In the subsequent years, the former Japan international has made regular appearances in the footballing news cycle as his record has grown, and 2025 was no different. In November, aged 58 years and 263 days, he extended his record again, coming on in a league match for fourth-tier Atletico Suzuka against YSCC Yokohama in front of 720 fans.

The New Year saw him make headlines again as he set out on a new journey by signing on loan for third-tier club Fukushima United.

The question is: how does he keep on doing it?

Miura, more generally known as Kazu or, in full adulatory mode, King Kazu, has always been a special case. In 1982, at the age of 15, he dropped out of high school to play football in Brazil, an extremely rare choice then in education-oriented Japan. Kazu signed for Santos in 1986 and also played for such teams as Palmeiras and Coritiba.

During the 1990s, he was Japanese football's biggest star. His return home at the start of the decade to play for Yomiuri, the future Verdy Kawasaki, in the final two seasons of the Japan Soccer League ignited a "Kazu boom". Verdy became the pin-up boys who won back-to-back J. League titles in the new league's first two seasons of 1993 and 1994, and Kazu was the league's biggest Japanese star and first MVP. He was also top scorer in 1996.

At his best, he is remembered for deft individual skill, precision finishing and his hip-wiggling "Kazu dance" for celebrating goals. He was a celebrity as much as he was a footballer, and there was never any questioning his sex appeal. In 1995, Herb Ritts published a photo album, *Kazu*, which consisted entirely of nude and semi-nude photos of the muscular Japanese icon.

Kazu was huge for the national team, too, a key member of the side that won the 1992 Asian Cup and very nearly made it to the 1994 World Cup. He was the top scorer in qualification for the 1998 World Cup as well, Japan's first, but sensationally was then left out of the final squad for France.

World's oldest player...Kazuyoshi Miura is unveiled by Fukushima United

That, 28 years ago, was when his star started to wane, which raises all sorts of questions. Kazu was good but it would be hard to find any veteran Japanese journalist who rates him as Japan's best-ever player, even in his prime. In goalscoring terms, Kazu now stands eighth in the J. League's all-time rankings with 139 goals in 326 J1 and J2 matches.

Kazu did play again for Japan, scoring 55 goals in 89 appearances for Samurai Blue, but was ultimately dropped from the squad for the home World Cup, which might have been his crowning glory. Instead, he was offered a place on the national team staff, but turned it down; he only wanted to play. And that is the key to the mystery.

Kazu has always had the aura, fitness and determination, and above all has never wanted to be anything other than a professional footballer. Does he pull in sponsors? Possibly, but not enough to make any difference for a big club. Can his actual playing time (69 minutes across seven matches last season) justify a professional contract? Hardly. Does his longevity and records do anything for the reputation of his clubs? This is hard to imagine – the opposite is more probable – although they keep the clubs in the news and do enormous credit to him.

> Does he pull in sponsors? Possibly. Can his actual playing time justify a professional contract? Hardly

But what everyone agrees about Kazu is that his total dedication in training always sets the very finest example for the team. Is he, then, a coach? His clubs would not dare to say so because Kazu has never wanted to go down that road. What his clubs do get is an icon and exemplar, and this works well enough for them. What Kazu gets is the never-ending fulfilment of the dream of a 15-year-old boy who left for Brazil all those years ago.

Mike Plastow

Indian Super League

After months of delay, India's top flight is finally given the green light for 2026

If necessity is the mother of invention then desperation can bring rapid changes too. Time really was running out to play the Indian Super League (ISL) season but then, as 2026 dawned, a breakthrough was finally made.

Regular readers will know that the country's top tier was supposed to start the 2025-26 season back in September, but the 15-year Master Rights Agreement between the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and its commercial partner expired without a new one in place. All assumed that the pause would be short-lived, that something would come up, but the AIFF struggled to find a new partner and the situation drifted on.

By the start of the New Year, players had taken to social media to beg for something to be done, clubs were suspending first-team operations and struggling to make plans on and off the field. Then, on the first Tuesday of 2026, January 6, Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya attended a meeting in New Delhi with AIFF head Kalyan Chaubey and the clubs, at the end of which the long-awaited announcement was made.

"There was a lot of speculation regarding ISL, but today government, football federation and 14 clubs...had a meeting and we have decided that ISL will start February 14," said Mandaviya. "All clubs will participate."

There were doubts about the last sentence with reports that a number of clubs – some said four, others six – had conditions that were not yet fully confirmed. Yet, over the next few days, all fell into line.

The AIFF will take over the running of the show, providing most of the money for the shortened season. The sums are now massive, around £2 million in total, but needs must. At the time of writing, there are still details to be ironed out but each of the 14 teams are going to play 14 games each on a home-and-away basis. There is no relegation.

Picking the favourites is tricky given everything that has happened, or not happened, over the last few months and the lack of time to prepare. Each team is allowed six foreign players but many have left for reliable football over the last few months. Spanish midfielder Borja Herrera, for example, had starred for FC Goa but left for Indonesia in December. "Please stop the nonsense and make a decision to save Indian football," he implored the AIFF as he departed. "This is shameful."

Breakthrough ...AIFF president Kalyan Chaubey

It's not just the players. Mumbai City, who finished sixth last season, were rocked by the December news that City Football Group, who had majority ownership since 2019 and won four major trophies, had divested their shares and withdrawn, citing the uncertainty around Indian football.

> By the start of the New Year, players had taken to social media to beg for something to be done, and clubs were suspending first-team operations

Kolkata giants Mohun Bagan won the ISL shield last season, topping the table, and then went on to win the play-off series to take the ISL Cup. Goa, Northeast United and Bengaluru completed the top four.

The new boys are Inter Kashi, who must be wondering what they have let themselves in for in winning the I-League last year. Based in the holy Hindu city of Varanasi, the warriors were founded just two years ago.

There is some good news, though. The Asian Football Confederation regulates that clubs must play at least 24 games a season to qualify for continental competition. That rule has been waived this time around but Goa – courtesy of winning the AIFF Super Cup in December – and the team that takes the other place by finishing top of the new campaign's league standings (Mohun Bagan are banned for refusing to travel to Iran for a Champions League Two game in September) will have to qualify via the preliminaries to make the group stage proper.

It could be a lot worse, which is the message all around Indian football at the moment. The new season may not be what was expected or even wanted but there will be something.

John Duerden

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Dalymount Park... inside Bohemian FC's Dublin stadium

eye witness

Joseph Phelan reports

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Europe's most interesting football club

Europe's most interesting football club...Bohemian FC

Dalymount Park holds barely 4,000 fans and is sandwiched between residential streets and a dilapidated shopping centre. It's the antithesis of the modern glass-and-steel super-stadium; a throwback, a cracked-concrete testament to football's pre-corporate roots.

This is the home of Bohemian FC, known universally as Bohemians or Bohs, a fan-owned club that competes in the League of Ireland. On paper, they are a footballing footnote whose impact should barely register beyond their home in Phibsborough, north Dublin. Yet the club's influence now stretches far beyond. In an era of private equity, multi-club ownership and sports-washing, Dublin's Originals offer something different: one member, one vote, and a club determined to reflect the values of its fans.

Since the club's birth in 1890, Bohs have been 100% fan-owned and democratic to the core. Around 3,000 members can vote on club decisions and stand for the board, giving them real influence. Senior management, coaches and volunteers are involved in the day-to-day operations. Custodians rather than owners, their central tenet is to leave the club stronger than they found it. Volunteers run matchdays, and players take part in community events.

By prioritising their community, the club has raised hundreds of thousands of euros through its annual Christmas Toy Drive, given stadium spaces over to local charities instead of commercial hospitality, and taken on initiatives like anti-racism workshops and disability football programmes.

But it wasn't always this way. In the late 2000s, Bohs came close to collapse. Despite remaining fan-owned, the club had drifted into operating like many privately backed teams, chasing short-term success. On the pitch, it worked – Bohemians won four league titles in the first decade of this century – but without a wealthy owner to absorb losses, the finances unravelled.

Ownership of Dalymount was lost, debts mounted and, for the first time, the club's survival felt uncertain.

"For a time we forgot our role in society," says Daniel Lambert, Bohs' Chief Operating Officer. "When the money ran out we realised the club wasn't immortal. We recognised that the only way to protect it was to make sure people genuinely cared."

This forced a reckoning. If the club was going to last, it couldn't rely on trophies. It needed people to feel pride, ownership and connection beyond the pitch. The community-first model wasn't just a marketing strategy – it was a survival strategy.

"We're a good institution, and it's far better we operate like this than just be another privately-owned club trying to make money for someone who's already rich," Lambert adds.

Bohs' initiatives aim to build loyalty, stand out, and spark dialogue. And nowhere is that clearer than in their kit designs.

Since the early 2010s, Bohs have worn their politics openly – on their kits, in their messaging, and across their community work. It's an approach shared by clubs like St Pauli in Hamburg and Red Star FC in Paris, where football and social concerns aren't kept separate.

The 2020 decision to put "Refugees Welcome" on their kit, in partnership with Amnesty International, sparked plenty of attention and some backlash.

"Some people loved it, some were outraged," says Lambert. "People told us it was too political, but we saw it as a human rights issue.

"It became the most reported thing we'd ever done, much more than winning the double [in 2008]. I found that interesting. It was pissing people off, it wasn't what other clubs were doing, and both of those things amplified it."

Dublin's Originals... Bohs' club badge

> "It's far better we operate like this than just be another privately-owned club trying to make money for someone who's already rich"
>
> **Daniel Lambert, Bohemians' Chief Operating Officer**

Inevitably, the club's overtly political stance has brought critics. Former manager Roddy Collins, who led the club to the double in 2000-01, wrote a column arguing that Bohs had become too political. "The club has forgotten that being a successful football club is its primary objective," he argued.

Collins has a point insofar as Bohs haven't won any silverware since 2009. Lambert, though, would point out that the most successful period in the club's recent history almost coincided with its financial collapse.

Other LOI fans argue that Bohs are not unique. Sligo Rovers, for example, are also fan-owned, while Shamrock Rovers have managed to combine supporter input with on-pitch success; the south Dubliners are 50% owned by their members, and have won the league title in five of the last six years.

The most common criticism, though, is that the club is more concerned with its image, with the kit designs cited as evidence.

But for Lambert, the point is simple: if you're going to take a stand, why not wear it quite literally on your sleeve? The kit can be a billboard, a conversation starter, a walking advertisement for causes that matter.

As well as charitable causes, music has also had a big influence on their kits.

In 2021, Bohs teamed up with Dublin rock band Fontaines D.C. for a kit supporting homeless charity Focus Ireland, and again in 2024 to raise funds for Medical Aid For Palestinians – with the latter

Sell-out crowds... Bohs have one of the League of Ireland's highest attendances

catching global attention when it was worn by campaigner Greta Thunberg. Last year, an Oasis kit was commissioned to capitalise on the band's reunion gigs in Dublin's Croke Park, with the proceeds split between Bohs' projects and Music Generation Ireland and Irish Community Care Manchester.

This year's away kit is the result of a collaboration with Belfast hip-hop trio Kneecap and follows the same play-book: 30% of the profits raised from selling the shirt will go to ACLAI Palestine to build a community music studio at the Aida Camp in the West Bank. The fact that Lambert also manages Kneecap captures how Bohs has woven music, culture and community into the club's identity.

In an era where football shirts have become fashion statements, just as likely to be spotted at music festivals as in stadiums, the kits have helped raise the club's profile – and bring in revenue. Merchandise sales hit €7 million in 2025, more than the turnover of almost every other club in the league. Of that, over €1m went to charity – ten times what the league winner receives for lifting the trophy. These aren't just football shirts. They're political statements, fashion statements, and the engine that funds Bohemians both on and off the pitch.

The kits, though, are only the most visible expression of what the club stands for. Most of the work happens away from the spotlight.

Every Christmas, the club runs its annual Toy Drive for children living in Direct Provision (Ireland's system of accommodation for asylum-seekers) and emergency accommodation, an initiative that's raised more than €400,000 over the past eight years.

Inclusion runs deeper still. Bohs pioneered blind, amputee and walking football in Ireland, launched a Disability Supporters Association, became the first League of Ireland club to take part in Dublin Pride, and in 2024 introduced their first Down Syndrome futsal team.

"We work with limited resources, but we do a really good job with what we have," says Aibhinn Conway, the club's head of community. "We're lucky to work with fantastic partners that have allowed us, particularly over the last year, to really kick on.

"Sport is a really powerful vehicle, but I don't think people realise just how powerful it can be."

The club also has a unique approach to corporate hospitality. Dalymount Park is home to what they describe as "the only non-corporate box in the league," which, rather than being sold commercially, rewards community groups, volunteers and local organisations.

The result is a constant, tangible presence in the community. From schools and local programmes to Direct Provision centres and disability teams, Bohs are part of their supporters' lives.

And it brings people back to the club time and again. Last year, Bohs' average attendance was second only to champions Shamrock Rovers, whose ground is almost twice as big as Dalymount Park. Indeed, Bohs have outgrown their home of 125 years, with plans to redevelop underway.

Most football clubs were born as community institutions, built around shared identity, but in most cases that has been lost. Bohs have shown that the model can still work: achieving financial sustainability through deep community engagement and cultural relevance. In being unapologetically themselves, Bohs have become a club people talk about.

"Most fans don't want perfection," Lambert says. "They want authenticity."

Musical collaborations...last year Bohs produced an Oasis kit for the band's Dublin gigs at Croke Park

LEAGUE OF IRELAND 2026

BOHEMIANS
This will be Bohs' last season at Dalymount Park before a new stadium will be built at the famous Phibsborough venue. Manager Alan Reynolds signed a new two-year deal towards the end of last season, when he led the team back into Europe by finishing fourth. The next target is to win a trophy.

DERRY CITY
Finished second behind Shamrock Rovers last season, but without ever really challenging them. Manager Tiernan Lynch, who won two Northern Irish Premiership titles with Larne, has plenty of ambition, bringing 103-cap Republic of Ireland international James McClean back to his hometown club from Wrexham.

DROGHEDA UNITED
FAI Cup winners in 2024, the Drogs missed out on Europe last season as their owners, the Trivela Group, also own Danish club Silkeborg, who got the Conference League place. Manager Kevin Doherty is a great motivator and gets the most out of his squad. Their solitary League of Ireland Premier Division win came back in 2007.

DUNDALK
Back in the top flight after one season away and with new owners following a few turbulent seasons at board level. Manager Ciaran Kilduff has recruited a few experienced players from Dublin clubs. The Louth outfit were the first from outside Dublin to win the league title in 1933.

GALWAY UNITED
Made a great start in 2025 and were top of the table in May. But the loss of New Zealander Moses Dyer, who moved to Cambodia, saw them struggle and they just avoided a relegation play-off. Never won the league but manager John Caulfield has won the double with Cork City.

SHAMROCK ROVERS
After winning five league titles in six seasons, how can manager Stephen Bradley motivate the Hoops? Regular European football has seen millions of euros flow into the club with 22 league titles and 26 FAI Cup wins. Defender Josh Honohan has moved to Lincoln City, but midfielder Jake Mulraney joins from St Pat's.

SHELBOURNE
There is life after Damien Duff. Another former Irish international Joey O'Brien, who was Duff's assistant, steadied the ship at Tolka Park after Duff's shock exit last June. The Reds qualified for the Conference League league phase, but failed to score a single goal in six games. Harry Wood, who joined from Hull City, makes Shels tick.

SLIGO ROVERS
The Bit O'Red have kept the league flag flying in the northwest of the country for decades. Won the league title three times, in 1937, 1977 and 2012. Unlike other clubs they don't have any benefactor, always raising funds locally, and often rated as relegation candidates.

ST PATRICK'S ATHLETIC
Ex-Republic of Ireland manager Stephen Kenny is now in his second full season in charge *(read more in our interview on page 36)*. St Pat's missed out on Europe last season but Kenny, a four-time title winner with Dundalk, will be hoping for an improvement. After losing Mason Melia to Spurs, more goals are needed from striker Aidan Keena.

WATERFORD
The Blues' halcyon days were in the 1960s when they won the league title six times between 1966 and 1973. A few different owners in recent years have not helped. After losing two managers last year, Jon Daly, who has previously managed St Pat's and Dundalk, is now in charge.

Profiles compiled by Seán Creedon

6 of the best

Irish young guns

The next generation of Irish talent is showing plenty of promise. **Jamie Evans** picks out six players that *World Soccer* will be keeping a close eye on

1 Rocco VATA

WATFORD

Vata was born in Glasgow after his father, former Albania defender Rudi, played for Celtic in the 1990s, yet Vata Junior opted to play for the Republic of Ireland for whom he is eligible through his mother. With just one cap to his name so far, the 20-year-old could yet switch his international allegiance, but that seems unlikely given that he has been part of the youth set-up since making his debut for the Under-15s in 2019. Last year's call-up to the seniors, for a Nations League clash with Bulgaria, was a reward for scoring six goals in just ten caps for the Under-21s.

A technical, fleet-footed winger, at his best cutting in from the left, he is mostly used off the bench in the Championship by his club, but that has not stopped rumours of a £20 million transfer.

2 Victor OZHIANVUNA

SHAMROCK ROVERS

Shamrock Rovers can expect some curious observers during the 2026 season, as Arsenal fans tune in to watch a player that will join them next January.

Those fans can expect to see a player with bundles of ability, who always looks to take on his marker and go forward. Primarily an attacking midfielder, he was initially used as a wing-back by Rovers but, given his talent, seems likely to play more centrally as his influence on the team grows.

Like Vata, Ozhianvuna has several international options. Born in Dublin to Russian and Nigerian parents, he represented Republic of Ireland at the Under-17 World Cup last year but has not played at any older age groups. The Irish FA will be keen to ensure that he does not slip away.

3 Michael NOONAN
SHAMROCK ROVERS

Like Mason Melia, the teen striker who joined Tottenham Hotspur in January for a League of Ireland record fee, Noonan started his career at St Patrick's Athletic and, despite his tender years, is already leading the line in the Irish top flight.

Noonan won't turn 18 until the summer, yet scored nine goals in 46 games in all competitions after joining Shamrock Rovers in 2025.

As soon as the season finished, he headed over to Qatar to help fire Republic of Ireland's Under-17s to the last 16 of the U17 World Cup, scoring three times in his country's first-ever appearance at the finals.

A bustling left-footed centre-forward, he could be swapping the hoops of Rovers for those of Celtic in the future, with the Scottish giants reportedly long-term admirers.

4 Jaden UMEH
BENFICA

Another member of the Republic of Ireland's Under-17 World Cup squad, Umeh was one of the youngest players in League of Ireland history when he made his senior debut for Cork City at the age of 15 in 2023, and a few months later became the club's youngest-ever goalscorer too. That caught the eye of Benfica, who snapped him up for their Under-19 team a year later.

The winger has been a regular in this season's UEFA Youth League, playing five times as the Eagles finished second in the league phase behind Chelsea, and has also been a regular goalscorer in Portugal's national junior championship.

Umeh's older brother Franco is also a promising winger, currently plying his trade in the English Championship with Portsmouth.

5 John PATRICK
REIMS

Few Irish internationals have had a background quite like Patrick's. Born in Madrid to a French mother and an Irish father, his footballing development took place entirely in Spain – including a couple of years in Real Madrid's academy – with his experience of Ireland limited to summer holidays at his grandparents' in County Mayo.

He left Spain at the start of 2025, joining Reims from Getafe, and after a number of Ligue 1 appearances was called up for his senior international debut against Luxembourg last June.

As a youngster he played on the wing, but he has since grown into a rangy defensive midfielder, calm and tidy in possession and particularly effective at hooking the ball away from opponents with those long legs.

6 Aaron OCHOA
MALAGA

Remarkably, Patrick is not the only Spanish-born star in the Irish ranks at the moment. As well as Seville-born centre-back Anselmo Garcia MacNulty, who has won a dozen U21 caps and currently plays in the Eredivisie for PEC Zwolle, there is also Malaga's Ochoa.

Like Patrick, the 18-year-old midfielder was born in Spain to an Irish parent. After growing up in Marbella, his career developed down the coast at the academy of Malaga before making his club debut aged 16 in 2023. Since then, he has gradually established himself for the Spanish second-tier side while also playing regularly for Ireland's Under-19s.

Unlike Patrick, Ochoa is a diminutive creative midfielder, operating between the lines and relying on his dribbling ability to create chances.

STEPHEN KENNY

"I'm probably in my prime as a manager now"

The former Republic of Ireland manager looks back on his lengthy career, assesses the next generation of Irish talent, and looks ahead to the new season with St Patrick's Athletic

You were just 26 when you took over at Longford Town in 1998. Why did you start pursuing management at such a young age?
I did turn down offers to play in the Irish First Division, but I knew that I wanted to get to the highest level I could and that was going to be coaching rather than playing. I was very interested in the tactical side of the game. I studied a lot of European coaches and teams. I wanted to bring my ideas into a club environment in what was a physically demanding league. It was always possession-based, with a focus on how individual talent can flourish within the framework of a team. I had an interest in wing play and played exciting wingers a lot of the time.

You gave up running your business to work in football full-time. Was that a hard decision?
Initially I was manager of Longford, which was a part-time club, and I ran a business as well, so to go full-time with Bohemians was a big step. It was a fork-in-the-road moment. It was something that I was willing to do, and commit to, even though we had a young family. I've always committed everything to every job I've had and that's been important.

Management is notoriously demanding in terms of time, thought and energy. What motivates you to do it?
It's never just been about winning for me, even though I've won a lot in my career. It's the impact a club can have on a region. The European runs are special. The run we had at Derry back in 2006 was amazing for the city. Beating Gothenburg home and away and then going and playing Paris Saint-Germain in the Parc des Princes. Dundalk was an incredible journey – the first Irish club to get points in the Europa League. We were in a play-off with Legia Warsaw, right until the end, to get through to the Champions League group stage. Playing as well as we did in all those games, and not being set up in a defensive way, our passing style captured the imagination of the Irish public.

Given how ruthless football can be, only a select few managers make it to 1,000 games in club management. What did it mean to you to reach that milestone in 2025?
It crept up on me. I was never really counting, especially because I'd been in international football for nearly five years with the Under-21s and then the senior team, so that probably cost me another 200 games. It wasn't something I was focusing on, so it was a surprise.

Every single season you need to prove yourself. You have to get better. The trends are rapidly changing and you have to adapt with that. I suppose the fact I've understood that has helped me to attain a level of longevity in the game. I'd still consider that, at 54 years of age, I'm probably in my prime as a manager now, so I have many years ahead. But you've got to earn it. Nobody gives you anything.

Your reign as Republic of Ireland manager lasted 40 games. How do you reflect on that experience?
Losing to Slovakia on penalties [in 2020] was devastating because it would have taken us into the final against Northern Ireland to qualify for the Euros. That team finished its cycle, a lot of experienced players at the end of their careers. We blooded 24 players – Caoimhin Kelleher, Nathan Collins, Dara O'Shea, Ryan Manning, Josh Cullen, Will Smallbone, Troy Parrott, Adam Idah – all of those lads came through. They had a lot of good performances. We obviously didn't win enough games, that's why I lost my job. I get that, and I'm not complaining about that. I respect the decision, but our final group for Euro 2024 qualification, with France, the Netherlands and Greece, was very tough.

You gave Troy Parrott his international debut. What have you made of his progress since then? How did it feel to see him score that crucial hat-trick against Hungary in November?
He scored a big goal against Scotland for us, and a few others as well. A real technical player who's an exceptional finisher. His loan spells from Tottenham were up and down, but overall I thought he did well. He got his move to the Netherlands [to AZ Alkmaar] and he's excelled there. To get five goals in one international window shows how far he's developed. The ➤

fact that they were of such significance, against Portugal and Hungary, will be tough for anyone to rival. He's a credit to himself. I'm really thrilled for him. Hopefully he can get the goals to fire us through to the World Cup. That would really lift the country.

Do you take pride in seeing so many of those young players become mainstays of the national team?

When I became Under-21s manager, we sat down with all of the other managers, of the 16s, 17s, 18s, 19s, and put a plan in place to get the best players into the senior team. We'd only had one homegrown player come through in eight years – Alan Browne. There was a deficit and we needed to address that. We had the players in their 30s and the players who were 20, and very little in between. All of that group, who have done really well, came from the Under-21s into the senior team at a young age and got a lot of caps under their belt. It accelerated the development of their careers and they have good futures ahead of them.

ABOVE: Former assistant...Kenny with Keith Andrews during his time as Republic of Ireland manager
BELOW: St Pat's boss...Kenny during the Conference League qualifiers in the summer of 2024

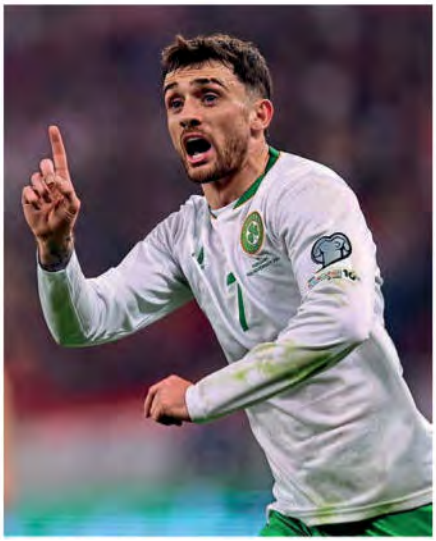
Keith Andrews was an important part of your coaching staff with Ireland. What have you made of his start as Brentford manager?

A lot of coaches who were with me with Ireland have done well. Anthony Barry's now England's assistant manager. He's done brilliantly. I'm delighted for him. John Eustace is at Derby County. He works extremely hard. He's looking forward to building that club. Keith was my assistant for five years, with the Under-21s and the senior team. He's a super-organised coach. An excellent communicator on the training ground and in meetings. He has an incredibly high work ethic. He's a very dynamic individual, who looks very at home at Premier League level. He understands Brentford's strengths and tries to maximise them.

You became manager of St Patrick's Athletic in May 2024. How would you assess the job you've done so far?

Taking over in mid-season, we went from third from bottom to almost winning the league. We've had 12 European games [in Conference League qualifying]. There were some big wins, but the Turkish teams, Istanbul Basaksehir and Besiktas, were too strong for us overall. We took over quite a tactical team that maybe lacked the sort of physicality and athleticism you need, so we've got to address that now and get it right. A lot of teams are playing five at the back, so we have to work out ways of scoring more.

There's a lot of excitement around Mason Melia, who recently left to join Tottenham Hotspur. How good do you think he could become?
I put him into the St Pat's first team at 16, leading the line. He was our centre-forward in those big European games. It's unusual that a 16-year-old could come in and deal with the physicality of international centre-backs. He has a bit of everything – he works extremely hard, he's very mobile and presses high out of possession, and he can score goals. He's a threat over the top and in the box off crosses, so he has an all-round game and he's continuing to improve. It's obviously a big jump going to Tottenham, but he'll take it in his stride. He's a very tough young man. He's definitely hungry to do well and he'll give everything of himself in trying to do that.


"An exceptional finisher"...Troy Parrott played 20 times for the national team under Kenny's management

Your contract with St Pat's runs until 2029. What do you hope to achieve in that time?
I just want to get the team ready for this season and not look too far ahead. We didn't finish last season well, so I decided not to take a holiday and just to focus on making us better. I spent my time in England visiting different clubs and looking to update what we do. Sometimes you need to do extreme things to achieve the level of success that you need. Winning titles is what I'm interested in and building a team that can do that is going to be a challenge. Shamrock Rovers have been dominant but there are a lot of teams in contention.

How much has the League of Ireland changed during your time as a manager? What would help it grow further?
The big thing is the passionate support. More supporters want to come from all over the country. A lot of people want live football and there's a lot of talent. The physical infrastructure of the stadiums and the lack of training facilities has really held clubs back. I think the lack of government support has been clear for two decades, as the money has gone to rugby and to Gaelic football. Hopefully that's changing. It's a passionate country for football and hopefully the stadiums can be developed to reflect that. You've got a lot of Dublin derbies that are sold out. When you're turning people away, they might not come back. That's the reality.

Have you had opportunities to manage in England? Would that interest you one day?
When I was in the Ireland job there were opportunities, but the international team was the most important thing for me. Managing your country is the highest accolade.

You can never rule anything out in any part of the world in the future, but I'm privileged to be in a job at St Patrick's. At the moment I'm just focused on trying to make St Pat's very competitive for this season and get them challenging for the league title because 2013 was their last one.

Interview by Sean Cole

> "We put a plan in place to get the best players into the senior team – we'd only had one homegrown player come through in eight years"

"A very tough young man"...Spurs new boy Mason Melia shone under Kenny's guidance at St Patrick's Athletic

No room for racism
BRENTFORD
FOOTBALL CLUB
HOLLYWOOD

BOLT FROM BRAZIL

Igor Thiago's rise from the lower reaches of Brazilian football to challenging at the top of the Premier League scoring charts

Words: Sean Cole

Brentford specialise in succession planning. The ability to spot and refine raw talent, sell it at a considerable profit and reinvest cleverly is the model that has powered the club's extraordinary growth.

Over the past decade, Brentford have impressively regenerated their attack time and again. The departures of Neal Maupay, Ollie Watkins, Ivan Toney, Yoane Wissa and Bryan Mbeumo brought in at least £200 million in player sales. Whenever a star player was sold, their replacement seamlessly filled the void.

Last summer Wissa and Mbeumo left, along with captain Christian Norgaard and manager Thomas Frank, and the Bees were widely tipped for relegation. This season promised to be the greatest test their model has faced and it's proven as robust as ever, elevating a little-known Brazilian striker to hero status.

It was back in February 2024, with Toney preparing to leave, that a £30m deal for Club Brugge's Igor Thiago was announced. His strength, determination and work rate had seen him prosper in Bulgaria and then Belgium. Now, following an injury-ravaged first campaign, he's terrorising the Premier League too.

The route the 24-year-old target man has taken to reach this point, and a potential spot in Brazil's World Cup squad, is far from conventional but he's never stopped believing in himself. According to former Ludogorets team-mate Simon Sluga, people need to look past Thiago's powerful build and sharp technique to see his greatest strength.

"In my opinion, it's his mentality and personality, because I think those things can always push you to do more than you're capable of," he says. "His physicality and his talent will always be on a high level, but if you don't have those other things, you can be average. You can be okay with whatever the situation is. You can be lazy. But he's always working, wanting more and pushing. The sky's the limit."

Thiago was born in Gama, not far from Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. A tough upbringing moulded him into a resilient and strong-willed character. When he was 13, his father died. Forced to take on more responsibility at home, he worked a series of odd jobs, including as a bricklayer, to help support his mother.

A career in football felt like a pipedream but Thiago persevered, making his debut for Cruzeiro in January 2020, at the age of 18. Over the next two years, he scored ten goals in 64 appearances for the then second-tier club before deciding to test himself in Europe.

Joining Ludogorets in early 2022 was a giant leap into the unknown – a drastically different country, league and culture without the familiar comforts of home. Heavy investment had turned a small provincial club based in Razgrad into serial champions who were on course for their 11th consecutive title.

"When he came he didn't speak English at all, so that was a little bit of an issue. But he started to learn," recalls Sluga, a Croatian international goalkeeper. "You have a lot of Brazilians

there – players and staff – so he communicated more through them, but he adapted very quickly.

"He was the third striker. For a few months, he was very patient. He was working and working. All the time, he was saying: 'My time is going to come, and when it comes, I won't let it go.' He was like a magnet – all the good things that happened to him, he was provoking them."

Ludogorets demanded success, and Thiago wasn't judged to be ready straightaway. Initially, he played for the reserves in the second tier, notching three goals in his first two games. Almost two months after signing, he finally made his first-team debut against CSKA Sofia as a second-half substitute. Within a minute of entering the pitch, Thiago scored.

As the next season got underway Thiago was left out of the squad for Ludogorets' opening two league games, but he seized the initiative on his first start, registering two goals and two assists in a 5-0 win. A relentless Thiago bullied the Spartak Varna defence and showed some nice footwork to set up Cicinho with a backheel.

"He's one of the best characters I've met during my career," says Sluga. "He's a big competitor. He always wants to win and he always wants to score. One's not enough, so he searches for the second. Two isn't enough, so he searches for the third.

"He's a very nice person. A very good friend and team-mate. We spent a lot of time together because at one point both our families went home so we were by ourselves for two or three months. We started spending time together and became friends."

Thiago worked hard to improve his finishing and reaped the rewards when he finally became a regular. He found his rhythm, starting his last 16 league games for Ludogorets and scoring 12 goals, including a first professional hat-trick against Botev Vratsa. With Thiago leading the line, they won another title and reclaimed the Bulgarian Cup.

Determined to reach the highest level, Thiago knew that he needed to prove himself in a more competitive European league. Moving to Club Brugge in June 2023 seemed like the perfect step. A fee of just under £7m made him the most expensive player in the history of the Bulgarian league.

"I just remember his big smile. He always has this great energy and he's very welcoming," says Danish winger Philip Zinckernagel, who arrived a few weeks later. "Pretty quickly, I had a good

European breakthrough... Igor Thiago made his name with Ludogorets

Prolific...Igor Thiago scored 29 goals in 55 games for Club Brugge

bond with him, especially off the pitch and in the dressing room. We spent a lot of time playing Teqball [a game played on a curved table, combining aspects of football and table tennis].

"He was one of those guys you could always joke and smile with. We had the same kind of humour. He also liked to do extras after training – shooting drills and stuff like that, always with a bit of competition and banter involved, so that was nice."

After a positive start, Thiago suddenly hit a lean spell. Brugge dropped to seventh as he endured a run of nine league games without a goal. Zinckernagel remembers the crowd showing their frustration, but Thiago's seemingly bulletproof self-belief never wavered.

"He had periods at the beginning of the season where he was struggling a little bit and the fans were tough on him. I think some were booing him. You could see he was a little bit sad about it, but he didn't feel sorry for himself. He still came in smiling and was happy and just worked hard."

When everything clicked, Thiago went on an incredible goalscoring run. Around the turn of the year, he bagged 11 goals in just six matches, five of them penalties. Shortly after, Brentford pounced. His aerial strength, intense pressing, and desire to improve were all ideally suited to their system.

Zinckernagel saw the biggest transformation in Thiago's ability to receive the ball with his back to goal and bring others into play. "That part of his game got so much better, just the touches and using his body. By the end of the season, we could play it up [to him], he would hold players off and be a really solid station for us.

"We would play football on the ground, but if you're struggling to get into their half, it's great to have a striker that can help you do that. When you have good touches in hold-up play, you bring that confidence into the box and start scoring goals as well."

In May 2024, Brugge surged to the title. "It meant a lot to him," says Zinckernagel. "He had a knee injury at the end of the season and I think he was afraid of missing out on the trophy. He puts a lot of emotions into his football. You can probably see that when you watch him play. I guess it's also what makes him special, because he's always giving 100%."

> "He always wants to score. One's not enough, so he searches for the second. Two isn't enough, so he searches for the third"
>
> Igot Thiago's former team-mate Simon Sluga

After scoring 53 goals across all competitions in Bulgaria and Belgium, Thiago was ready and primed for the Premier League.

But his first season at Brentford was a disaster, as knee injuries limited him to just eight appearances. In his absence, Wissa and Mbeumo thrived, and Thiago was the forgotten man. When the African duo secured high-profile moves last summer, few observers realised that in Thiago the Bees already had a ready-made attacking replacement.

After scoring his first for the club on the opening day, the goals continued to flow from there. At the start of January, a hat-trick against Everton was followed by a brace at home to Sunderland. Those two wins propelled the Bees up to fifth and meant that Thiago had made history: just 21 games into the Premier League season, he already had 16 goals – more than any Brazilian player had ever managed in a single campaign, beating the tally of 15 set previously by Roberto Firmino, Gabriel Martinelli and Matheus Cunha.

A committed Christian and family man, Thiago is married and has two young children that provide him with extra motivation. Because of his background, he has a real hunger to achieve and a greater appreciation of the privileged position he now finds himself in.

"It was clear that he wanted to go to the Premier League at some point. He believed in himself a lot," says Zinckernagel. "I don't know if I actually thought he would do it that quickly, but I'm very happy seeing him doing so well. With his mentality, I think he can do whatever he wants."

Sluga keeps in touch with Thiago and is proud of the rapid progress he's made. "I'm over the moon about it. As a footballer and a person, he deserves the best. For me, it's not a surprise. I'm enjoying it, honestly. He's always in my fantasy team! I have big trust in him to be there with Haaland! When he brings me points, I'm even happier!"

Record-breaking Brazilian...Igor Thiago scoring in this season's Premier League against Manchester United

Brazil's No.9...who will wear the famous shirt this summer?

BRAZIL'S NEXT NO.9

This summer will mark 20 years since Brazil last had a world-class centre-forward. Who will lead the line for the *Selecao* at the 2026 World Cup?

Words: Tim Vickery

The first sign that Brazil were going to be a major power came in the 1938 World Cup, where they finished third and had the tournament top goalscorer. Lithe and inventive, "the rubber man" who specialised in the bicycle kick, Leonidas da Silva set the template for much of what was to come.

They had the top marksman at the next World Cup in 1950 as well. Ademir lacked some of the subtlety and devilish cunning of Leonidas, but he was fast, strong and uncomplicated, a proficient finisher off both feet and in the air – a striker so dangerous that the back four was pioneered, opponents withdrawing another player to the heart of the defence to counter him.

When Brazil finally got their hands on the trophy, in 1958 and again in 1962, the centre-forward was Vava, a converted attacking midfielder with the intelligence and bravery to get on the end of Garrincha's crosses. In 1994, they had Romario, the little genius of the penalty area. Then came Ronaldo, an extraordinary marriage of speed, power and calm. All too briefly he was succeeded by Adriano, but since then nobody of a similar calibre has emerged. It is a sobering thought, but the 2026 World Cup will mark 20 years since Brazil's attacking line was led by a globally acclaimed genuinely world-class centre-forward.

How can this be explained?

There could be a purely cyclical element to this. But it is striking that in the same period the country has produced an extraordinary conveyor belt of wingers and strikers in wide spaces (most notably Neymar who, having signed a new contract with Santos for 2026, is still fighting for his place – more on page 82).

This could have something to do with the way that the domestic game has developed. The standard of Brazilian club football has improved in recent years – not only as a result of more money coming in, but also with the influx of foreign (especially Portuguese) coaches. Teams have become more compact. But for a long time there was a large gap between the lines of the sides. Once single-striker systems – 4-2-3-1, for example – caught on, the centre-forward could find himself hopelessly isolated. The wingers, meanwhile, were able to find plenty of acceleration space.

The defeat to Belgium at the 2018 World Cup seems especially symbolic. The Belgians were able to field a box-to-box creative midfielder like Kevin De Bruyne, and a mobile and imposing centre-forward in Romelu Lukaku. Brazil had a good team. But they could not compete in these two key positions.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti has divided his 2026 centre-forward options into two types. There is the target man, the reference point in the penalty area, and there is the one he sees as a mixture of a No.9 and a No.10, happy to drop deeper.

Which way will he go? Much depends on how he sets up his side. He clearly favours two wingers, with Vinicius Junior cutting inside. This boosts the chances of the Matheus Cunha type, balancing out the side and offering passing options as the team look to play forward. But if, in the extreme heat, he wants to play an extra man in midfield then there is a greater possibility of two wingers and a target man – and whatever happens, there will be a role for this type of player on the bench, ready to come on when Brazil are chasing the game.

There is even a chance of no orthodox centre-forward at all, with Raphinha moving infield and Vinicius seeking to attack space in the area, forming a front four alongside Estevao and Rodrygo. It is worth remembering that the great 1970 side played without a genuine centre-forward; Tostao usually played in the same No.10 role as Pele, and was improvised up front for the tournament in Mexico – an experiment which worked wonderfully well.

The other factor to consider is the player's reputation. Those yellow shirts come with a tremendous weight of expectation, and the Brazilian public expect only the very best to wear them. Anyone that has made their name outside of Brazil, or is playing for a club regarded as minor, can expect to face much harsher scrutiny than those that have shone back home.

The lack of a truly outstanding candidate for the centre-forward role has opened up the race to a variety of candidates – listed in the following pages, in a sequence aimed to approximate their standing in the pecking order. It is worth pointing out, though, that none of them have been on target in the Ancelotti era.

RICHARLISON

Tottenham Hotspur

(54 caps, 20 goals)

An Ancelotti favourite after the pair of them worked together at Everton, Richarlison has been handed every chance to lead Brazil's line in a second consecutive World Cup. He has always been called up, and has played six times – two starts and four appearances off the bench – in the first eight games of the Ancelotti reign.

This, however, is straining the patience of many of Brazil's football public, because recent form – for club or country – would not seem to justify a call-up. Powerful and uncomplicated, a little reminiscent of a racehorse wearing blinkers, Richarlison has a good record for the national team, and was badly missed when injury cut his game short in the fatal 2022 World Cup quarter-final against Croatia. But he has not scored for his country since Qatar, and both injuries and confidence have been a problem.

ABOVE: Gold medallists...Richarlison and Matheus Cunha at the Olympics in 2021

The loyalty of the coach is an important asset, and Richarlison is very much in the running to be Brazil's target-man option in the World Cup. But he is coming under increasing pressure to prove himself worthy of inclusion. He took immediately to international football when he was brought into the squad, as a late injury replacement, straight after Russia 2018, and urgently needs to rediscover that freshness and vigour.

Matheus CUNHA

Manchester United *(19 caps, 1 goal)*

When Brazil won the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, the front partnership was formed by Richarlison and Matheus Cunha. Now it looks like a case of one or the other in the starting line-up, depending on how Ancelotti constructs his side.

Cunha was the key player in that Under-23 generation that ended up winning gold, and was perhaps unlucky not to have gone to the last World Cup. He played in some of the qualifiers, but ran into two disadvantages. Firstly, he has played his entire senior career abroad, and was not well known to the Brazilian public. Secondly, for all his rangy threat, he was not scoring. This has not dramatically improved. His only goal came in that 4-1 defeat to Argentina last March, the last game before Ancelotti stepped in.

Nevertheless, the new coach is a big fan. Starting four times and coming off the bench twice, Cunha has been the striker who has seen the most action under the current regime. Ancelotti relishes his capacity to receive the ball between the opposing lines. And for all the problems at Old Trafford – before the recent rejuvenation under Michael Carrick – the Manchester United move has raised his profile. Cunha will surely be in the World Cup squad, with the potential for more if he performs well in March's friendlies v France and Croatia.

Igor JESUS
Nottingham Forest *(5 caps, 1 goal)*

Igor Jesus was unknown to the Brazilian public when Botafogo brought him back from the United Arab Emirates on a free transfer in the middle of 2024, but by the time he moved on to England a year later he was a star. A vital player in the Botafogo side that won the league and the Copa Libertadores, he also came up with an epic performance when his side ground out a famous victory over Paris Saint-Germain at the Club World Cup.

He gained his first caps in the reign of Dorival Junior, Ancelotti's predecessor. Although he has only made one substitute appearance under the new regime, he is very much in the thoughts of the coach, who often mentions him as an option for the target-man role. His capacity to compete and hold the ball up was praised recently by Pep Guardiola, and his willingness to serve as the first line of defence is also a virtue. The drawback is that he does not to score as many goals as he seems capable of. The turmoil at his club in his debut Premier League season – three different managers since signing – has surely not helped, but even with Botafogo he was not prolific.

Jesus is in the mix for the Brazil squad, but there are no guarantees.

Joao PEDRO
Chelsea *(6 caps, 0 goals)*

An alternative to Matheus Cunha in the 9-10 hybrid role is Joao Pedro. Ancelotti is clearly intrigued, handing him a start in the last home World Cup qualifier, against Chile, when Cunha was unavailable, and has also made two substitute appearances under the current regime. The coach likes his capacity to link the play from deep and his combination of swagger and power, but would almost certainly be hoping to see him become a more consistent goalscorer – he is yet to score for Brazil.

He scored a flurry of goals when introduced to the Fluminense first team in 2019, but already felt the wrath of some of the fans when the goals dried up. He then fell off the radar following an early move to Watford, before switching to Brighton.

Last year's Club World Cup was massive in Brazil, and so the way that he made such an instant impact after joining Chelsea during the course of the competition did wonders for his profile back home. He will clearly be expecting to return to the United States this summer, but faces a vital few months ahead as he jockeys for position.

PEDRO
Flamengo *(6 caps, 1 goal)*

A truly fascinating case. Pedro is a tall striker with excellent finishing skills and good touch and awareness around the penalty area, yet no one is really sure whether he can tip the balance at the highest level. He is not quick or mobile and does not hold the ball up with any great strength or conviction. Fiorentina gave up on him after less than a handful of matches, and he made next to no impression when brought on twice at the last World Cup. Even club coach Filipe Luis at times seems to treat him like a luxury player, complaining about his lack of effort in training and taking him off early after Flamengo had a man sent off right at the start of a game.

Injuries have also been a problem, costing him the chance to win many more caps. Ancelotti has yet to have a look at him, but a good start to the Brazilian season could force his hand. The coach has made a point of mentioning Pedro as a candidate for the target-man role, and there is a giant media lobby to press for the inclusion of the local idol.

Igor THIAGO

Brentford *(0 caps, 0 goals)*

Could it really happen? Igor Thiago made his debut with Cruzeiro, a big club – but at a moment when they were going through hard times. And so he has only played Serie B in Brazil – and from there on to Bulgaria, Belgium and now Brentford. There is great resistance in Brazil to the inclusion in the national team of unknowns who are deemed to be playing for small foreign clubs. Getting a call-up with that back-story would be to climb Everest the hard way.

And yet the bearded bomber has forced himself into the conversation. As soon as early January he became the Brazilian with the most goals in a single Premier League season – and the local media was then carrying plenty of articles introducing him to the public. It helps, of course, not only that Ancelotti is the coach, but also that one of his assistants is English coach Paul Clement, who must surely be following the progress of Thiago, and pondering on whether the barrel-chested figure could be a candidate for the No.9 role. It will be a tense moment in West London when Brazil's squad for the March friendlies is announced.

Vitor ROQUE

Palmeiras *(2 caps, 0 goals)*

A burly adolescent prodigy who made his debut off the bench at the age of 18 in Brazil's first game after Qatar, and then fired the Under-20s to the South American Championship a few months later. But a move to Barcelona did not work out and he was on loan at Real Betis when Palmeiras paid a then-record fee for a Brazilian club to bring him back last year.

At first he made little impression, but after the Club World Cup coach Abel Ferreira found the formula, recognising that Vitor Roque is a striker who needs space and was struggling squeezed in between the rival centre-backs. So he was pushed a little deeper and to the left, where, charging forward with power and purpose, he worked extremely well in a strike partnership with the Argentine "Flaco" Lopez. This positional preference does not make it easy for him to force his way into the national team, but goals in front of the Brazilian audience have a special power, and he was recalled for another substitute appearance in November. A good start to the domestic season will put him in the conversation.

ENDRICK

Lyon *(14 caps, 3 goals)*

When Endrick, then 17, came off the bench to score in three consecutive friendlies in 2024, the centre-forward problem seemed to have been solved. But then came the move to Real Madrid.

This was surely a case of the wrong club at the right time. Madrid had just acquired Kylian Mbappe, and Endrick found himself at a club that simply did not need him. Ancelotti, his club coach at the time, gave him a few opportunities, and his numbers were satisfactory when he did play. But, in a team that in the previous season had learned to play without a striker, Endrick was surplus to requirements, and stalled as a result.

There was another problem, one that impacts many forwards who are naturals for a 4-4-2 system. In a single-striker format, where could Endrick fit in? Short and stocky, he is not an obvious target man. But he is not a winger either. Still a teenager, Endrick faces a question of definition. Ancelotti advised him to get away from Madrid – both to play more, and to further develop. He scored on his debut after joining Lyon on loan, and then hit a hat-trick v Metz – the sort of form that could see him earn a Brazil recall.

KAIO JORGE

Cruzeiro *(1 cap, 0 goals)*

Sleek central striker, rapid and mobile, who was the top scorer of last year's Brazilian championship with 21 goals. Seeing him as the missing part of the jigsaw, champions Flamengo came in for him in January, but Cruzeiro held on to their man.

A former Under-17 World Cup winner, Ancelotti gave him one game off the bench in the World Cup qualifiers, against Chile, and then left him out of subsequent squads.

A graduate of the Santos academy, he was still a teenager when he joined Juventus in 2021, but was not a success in Italy, either in Turin or on loan at Frosinone. Although he has come on leaps and bounds since then, that will still give Ancelotti cause to doubt whether the 24-year-old has enough – either in terms of pace, skill or strength – to trouble the world's best defenders.

Lightweight for a target man, and not contributing much to the build-up, it is worth wondering whether he falls somewhere in between the two profiles that Ancelotti has outlined for his strikers. Presumably, nothing short of a sensational start to the domestic season will be enough for Kaio Jorge to force his way into contention.

Gabriel JESUS

Arsenal *(64 caps, 19 goals)*

Back from a long-term knee injury, it is not clear how he is viewed by Brazil's coaching staff, but he would not be an easy sell to the public.

Almost a decade has gone by since Gabriel Jesus made a stunning start to his Brazil career, apparently sorting out the centre-forward problem – up until the 2018 World Cup, when he failed to score and was publicly blamed by the coach. It stands as a turning point in his career. Ever since he has seemed reluctant to take on the burden of being a goalscorer, preferring to see himself as a striker from wide spaces. Since the 2019 Copa America he has scored just one goal for the *Selecao*, and he did not leave a good impression in his last game, a 1-0 defeat to Argentina in November 2023, the only time Brazil have been beaten at home in a World Cup qualifier. After the match, he told the press that scoring goals was not his speciality, an odd declaration from someone wearing the No.9 shirt – though he later said the quote was misunderstood and taken out of context, simply meaning to say he has lots of other qualities aside from scoring goals.

And it's true, he does have plenty of other virtues, but the Arsenal man will presumably need a stunning second half of the season to earn himself an international recall and a shot at World Cup redemption.

EVANILSON

Bournemouth *(2 caps, 0 goals)*

A surprise call-up for the 2024 Copa America, Evanilson was given an hour in a friendly, five minutes off the bench in the quarter-final, and was immediately discarded by Dorival Junior – and, so far at least, there has been no sign of favour from Carlo Ancelotti.

Played at home briefly, for Fluminense, before making his name with Porto. At the time of his call-up, he was unknown to the majority of Brazil's football public and, no matter how effective he has been at Bournemouth, little that he can do on England's South Coast can change that. He suffers, then, both from a lack of profile at home and from the fact – powerful in Brazil – that he is seen to be playing for a minor club. He might be hoping that Paul Clement will be pushing his claims, but Evanilson will be listening out for squad announcements much more in hope than in any realistic expectation.

THE NUMBERS GAME

The best facts and stats from the league phase ahead of the knockout rounds

5

Five goalkeepers have now scored in the Champions League with Benfica's Anatoliy Trubin joining Hans-Jorg Butt, Vincent Enyeama, Sinan Bolat and Ivan Provedel

Dramatic...Anatoliy Trubin's last-gasp header against Real Madrid

100

Arsenal became the first team to complete the new league phase of the Champions League with a 100% record. They won all eight of their games, with seven of their victories achieved by a margin of two goals or more

22

At 22 years and 128 days, Jude Bellingham became the youngest player to reach 50 Champions League appearances, breaking the record previously held by another Real Madrid player, Iker Casillas

2

Sporting's last-gasp victory away to Athletic Club meant that they reached the knockout stages of the Champions League for the second consecutive season for the first time in their history

16

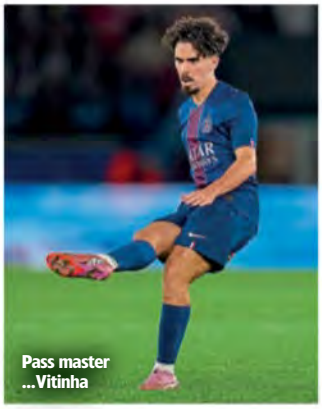
Borussia Dortmund striker Serhou Guirassy scored his 16th goal in his 20th Champions League game – only Erling Haaland has made a better start in the competition

49

Meanwhile, Haaland became the fastest player to net 50 Champions League goals, reaching the tally in just 49 games. Ruud van Nistelrooy held the previous record, taking 62 games to hit the milestone

806

Paris Saint-Germain's Vitinha is the top distributor, completing 806 passes with an accuracy of 94%. That was 151 more completed passes than the next player in the list, Aleksandar Pavlovic of Bayern Munich


Pass master ...Vitinha

10

Following defeats to Arsenal and Liverpool, Atletico Madrid have now won just one of their last ten games against English opposition in the Champions League – a 1-0 last-16 victory against Manchester United at Old Trafford during the 2021-22 campaign

Dribble demon ...Lamine Yamal

6

The joint-top creators with six assists each are Bayern Munich winger Michael Olise and Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior

157

Bayern Munich's Manuel Neuer has now played 157 Champions League games, placing him fifth in the all-time list behind Cristiano Ronaldo (183), Iker Casillas (177), Thomas Muller and Lionel Messi (both 163)

72

Despite only playing six of the eight matches, Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal is the leading dribbler by far, completing 72 dribbles. The next best was Manchester City's Jeremy Doku on 55

49

Goalkeeper Nikita Haikin was Bodo/Glimt's hero of the league phase with 49 saves, more than any other goalkeeper

23

Arsenal were the top scorers in the league phase with 23 goals, with their Brazilian winger Gabriel Martinelli leading the way on six

Table toppers... Gabriel Martinelli was Arsenal's leading scorer

5

Five English sides – Arsenal, Liverpool, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and Manchester City – advanced directly to the last 16 by finishing in the top eight

2

Kylian Mbappe hit two hat-tricks, his fourth and fifth in Champions League football. Ronaldo and Messi share the competition record with eight trebles

487

A total of 487 goals were scored during the league phase, an average of 3.38 per match

50.03

Tottenham Hotspur's Pedro Porro has covered more ground than any other player in the competition so far, clocking up just over 50 kilometres

Historic achievement... Bodo/Glimt star Jens Petter Hauge

29

Bodo/Glimt are the first Norwegian team to reach the Champions League knockout stages in 29 years, since Rosenborg were knocked out by Juventus in the 1996-97 quarter-finals

All stats from uefa.com

League phase final standings

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Arsenal	8	8	0	0	+19	24
2	Bayern Munich	8	7	0	1	+14	21
3	Liverpool	8	6	0	2	+12	18
4	Tottenham Hotspur	8	5	2	1	+10	17
5	Barcelona	8	5	1	2	+8	16
6	Chelsea	8	5	1	2	+7	16
7	Sporting	8	5	1	2	+6	16
8	Manchester City	8	5	1	2	+6	16
9	Real Madrid	8	5	0	3	+9	15
10	Internazionale	8	5	0	3	+8	15
11	Paris Saint-Germain	8	4	2	2	+10	14
12	Newcastle United	8	4	2	2	+10	14
13	Juventus	8	3	4	1	+4	13
14	Atletico Madrid	8	4	1	3	+2	13
15	Atalanta	8	4	1	3	0	13
16	Bayer Leverkusen	8	3	3	2	-1	12
17	Borussia Dortmund	8	3	2	3	+2	11
18	Olympiacos	8	3	2	3	-4	11
19	Club Brugge	8	3	1	4	-2	10
20	Galatasaray	8	3	1	4	-2	10
21	Monaco	8	2	4	2	-6	10
22	Qarabag	8	3	1	4	-8	10
23	Bodo/Glimt	8	2	3	3	-1	9
24	Benfica	8	3	0	5	-2	9
25	Marseille	8	3	0	5	-3	9
26	Pafos	8	2	3	3	-3	9
27	Union Saint-Gilloise	8	3	0	5	-9	9
28	PSV	8	2	2	4	0	8
29	Athletic Club	8	2	2	4	-5	8
30	Napoli	8	2	2	4	-6	8
31	Copenhagen	8	2	2	4	-9	8
32	Ajax	8	2	0	6	-13	6
33	Eintracht Frankfurt	8	1	1	6	-11	4
34	Slavia Prague	8	0	3	5	-14	3
35	Villarreal	8	0	1	7	-13	1
36	Kairat	8	0	1	7	-15	1

Top eight advance to last 16, 9th to 24th enter play-offs, 25th to 36th eliminated

Turn to page 56 for the full knockout round draw

THE NUMBERS GAME

The best facts and stats from the league phase ahead of the knockout rounds

18

The joint top-scoring teams were Lyon and Midtjylland with 18 goals each, followed by PAOK on 17

Table toppers... joint-top goalscorers Lyon led the way in the league phase

39

With three goals in the league phase, Lille's Olivier Giroud is the third-oldest scorer in Europa League history at 39 years and 121 days. Real Betis legend Joaquin holds the all-time record, scoring at the age of 41 years and 56 days

16

Dinamo Zagreb youngster Cardoso Varela became the fourth youngest scorer in Europa League history by netting against Malmo at 16 years and 359 days. The all-time record is still held by Romelu Lukaku, set in 2009

312

Viktoria Plzen endured more than 300 minutes of goalless football, with Paulo Dybala's penalty against them for Roma and Lukas Cerv's early goal v Porto separated by three consecutive 0-0 draws

42

Nice's Brazilian defender Dante became the oldest outfield player in Europa League history by playing for the French side at the age of 42 years and 96 days

54

With his six goals coming on average every 54 minutes, Nottingham Forest centre-forward Igor Jesus was the most clinical striker of the league phase

7

With seven goal contributions (four goals and three assists) in just six games, Real Betis winger Antony was the standout attacker. The 0-0 draw with Genk was the only game in which he failed to score or create a goal

4

Four players jointly topped the assists charts with four apiece – Braga winger Ricardo Horta, PAOK wideman Andrija Zivkovic, Celta Vigo forward Bryan Zaragoza and Stuttgart striker Deniz Undav

Clinical... Nottingham Forest striker Igor Jesus

Europa League star ...Real Betis winger Antony

100

The most successful manager in tournament history with four titles, Unai Emery took charge of his 100th Europa League match during Aston Villa's meeting with Fenerbahce

0

Viktoria Plzen were the only team to go through the league phase unbeaten, yet still finished down in 14th place thanks to drawing five of their games

4

Four teams – Aston Villa, Bologna, Brann and Nottingham Forest – qualified for the knockout rounds in their first-ever appearances in the Europa League era

25

With 25 saves and just one goal conceded, Aston Villa's Marco Bizot had the best save ratio of any goalkeeper in the league phase

7

Ludogorets attacker Petar Stanic was the top scorer in the league phase with seven goals, including three penalties

Rock-solid...Aston Villa goalkeeper Marco Bizot

19

Gabri Veiga scored after just 19 seconds in Porto's win against Nice

386

Overall, 386 goals were scored during the league phase, an average of 2.68 per game

24

Ludogorets winger Caio Vidal was the most wasteful player of the league phase – no player took more shots than his 24, yet he failed to scored with any of them

100

Roma made history as the first team to win 100 Europa League/ UEFA Cup matches (including qualifying ties) with their 2-1 victory over Midtjylland

Profligate... Ludogorets' Caio Vidal

11

Braga are playing in the Europa League for the 11th consecutive season, the longest active streak. The all-time record is held by Club Brugge, who qualified for the competition 20 years in a row

All stats from uefa.com

League phase final standings

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Lyon	8	7	0	1	+13	21
2	Aston Villa	8	7	0	1	+8	21
3	Midtjylland	8	6	1	1	+10	19
4	Real Betis	8	5	2	1	+6	17
5	Porto	8	5	2	1	+6	17
6	Braga	8	5	2	1	+6	17
7	Freiburg	8	5	2	1	+6	17
8	Roma	8	5	1	2	+7	16
9	Genk	8	5	1	2	+4	16
10	Bologna	8	4	3	1	+7	15
11	Stuttgart	8	5	0	3	+6	15
12	Ferencvaros	8	4	3	1	+1	15
13	Nottingham Forest	8	4	2	2	+8	14
14	Viktoria Plzen	8	3	5	0	+5	14
15	Red Star Belgrade	8	4	2	2	+1	14
16	Celta Vigo	8	4	1	3	+4	13
17	PAOK	8	3	3	2	+3	12
18	Lille	8	4	0	4	+3	12
19	Fenerbahce	8	3	3	2	+3	12
20	Panathinaikos	8	3	3	2	+2	12
21	Celtic	8	3	2	3	-2	11
22	Ludogorets	8	3	1	4	-3	10
23	Dinamo Zagreb	8	3	1	4	-4	10
24	Brann	8	2	3	3	-2	9
25	Young Boys	8	3	0	5	-6	9
26	Sturm Graz	8	2	1	5	-6	7
27	FCSB	8	2	1	5	-7	7
28	Go Ahead Eagles	8	2	1	5	-8	7
29	Feyenoord	8	2	0	6	-4	6
30	Basel	8	2	0	6	-4	6
31	Red Bull Salzburg	8	2	0	6	-5	6
32	Rangers	8	1	1	6	-9	4
33	Nice	8	1	0	7	-8	3
34	Utrecht	8	0	1	7	-10	1
35	Malmo	8	0	1	7	-11	1
36	Maccabi Tel Aviv	8	0	1	7	-20	1

Top eight advance to last 16, 9th to 24th enter play-offs, 25th to 36th eliminated

Turn to page 56 for the full knockout round draw

THE NUMBERS GAME

The best facts and stats from the league phase ahead of the knockout rounds

5

Three players – Franko Kovacevic (Celje), Nardin Mulahusejnovic (Noah) and Mikael Ishak (Lech Poznan) – shared top spot in the scoring charts with five goals each

Miserly...AEK Larnaca only conceded once

1

AEK Larnaca only conceded one goal in the league phase, matching the previous record set by LASK in 2021-22 and Viktoria Plzen in 2023-24 when the competition still adopted a group-stage format

10

Ishak scored his tenth goal in the competition – two short of the all-time record, jointly held by Vangelis Pavlidis, Arthur Cabral and Eran Zahavi

3

In their first-ever European group campaign, Universitatea Craiova had the worst disciplinary record in the competition, picking up three red cards, 20 yellows and committing 105 fouls

15

AEK Larnaca winger David Gerasimou became the youngest player in the competition's history when he came on against AZ aged 15 years and 334 days

7

Seven clubs advanced to the knockout phase after their first-ever qualification for a European competition: Rayo Vallecano, Crystal Palace, Samsunspor, Drita, Shkendija, KuPS and Sigma Olomouc

100

Fiorentina, playing in a record-equalling fourth Conference League campaign, became the first team to score 100 goals in the competition. Albert Gudmundsson's goal v Dynamo Kyiv on Matchday 5 took them past the milestone

100th goal ...Fiorentina are the first team to reach the milestone in the UEFA Conference League

14

AEK Athens were the league phase's top scorers with 14 goals, with forwards Luka Jovic, Aboubakary Koita and Dereck Kutesa all contributing three each

European debutants ...Rayo Vallecano

41

Andre Tjay De Barr was fouled 41 times during the league phase – more than any other player in UEFA competitions this season. The Lincoln Red Imps forward was brought down on average every 13 minutes

4

Four teams made history as the first from their countries to reach the knockout stages of a UEFA competition: Drita (Kosovo), Shkendija (North Macedonia), KuPS (Finland) and Noah (Armenia)

3

Three Polish sides reached the knockout rounds, boosting the country's coefficient rankings. The Ekstraklasa could move into Europe's top ten leagues off the back of Rakow Czestochowa, Jagiellonia Bialystok and Lech Poznan's performances

3

Three teams came through the league phase unbeaten, including the top two, Strasbourg and Rakow Czestochowa, plus eighth-placed AEK Larnaca

44

At 44 years and 80 days, Lincoln Red Imps striker Lee Casciaro became the oldest player in any UEFA club competition when he came on against Legia Warsaw

Unbeaten ...Strasbourg topped the table without defeat

35

Henry Bonello was the busiest goalkeeper during the league phase, making 35 saves for Hamrun Spartans

0

Irish side Shelbourne became the first team to go through a Conference League group phase/league stage without scoring a single goal

256

In total, 256 goals were scored during the league phase – an average of 2.37 per game

39

At 39 years and 220 days, Edin Dzeko became the oldest scorer in Conference League history when he netted in Fiorentina's 3-0 victory at Rapid Vienna

Pass masters ...Shakhtar Donetsk

65

Shakhtar Donetsk recorded a league high 65% possession, while their 88% passing accuracy was only bettered by Strasbourg and Celje

All stats from uefa.com

League phase final standings

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Strasbourg	6	5	1	0	+6	16
2	Rakow Czestochowa	6	4	2	0	+7	14
3	AEK Athens	6	4	1	1	+7	13
4	Sparta Prague	6	4	1	1	+7	13
5	Rayo Vallecano	6	4	1	1	+6	13
6	Shakhtar Donetsk	6	4	1	1	+5	13
7	Mainz	6	4	1	1	+4	13
8	AEK Larnaca	6	3	3	0	+6	12
9	Lausanne-Sport	6	3	2	1	+3	11
10	Crystal Palace	6	3	1	2	+5	10
11	Lech Poznan	6	3	1	2	+4	10
12	Samsunspor	6	3	1	2	+4	10
13	Celje	6	3	1	2	+1	10
14	AZ	6	3	1	2	0	10
15	Fiorentina	6	3	0	3	+3	9
16	Rijeka	6	2	3	1	+3	9
17	Jagiellonia Bialystok	6	2	3	1	+1	9
18	Omonia	6	2	2	2	+1	8
19	Noah	6	2	2	2	-1	8
20	Drita	6	2	2	2	-4	8
21	KuPS	6	1	4	1	+1	7
22	Shkendija	6	2	1	3	-1	7
23	Zrinjski Mostar	6	2	1	3	-2	7
24	Sigma Olomouc	6	2	1	3	-2	7
25	Universitatea Craiova	6	2	1	3	-2	7
26	Lincoln Red Imps	6	2	1	3	-8	7
27	Dynamo Kyiv	6	2	0	4	0	6
28	Legia Warsaw	6	2	0	4	0	6
29	Slovan Bratislava	6	2	0	4	-4	6
30	Breidablik	6	1	2	3	-5	5
31	Shamrock Rovers	6	1	1	4	-6	4
32	BK Hacken	6	0	3	3	-3	3
33	Hamrun Spartans	6	1	0	5	-7	3
34	Shelbourne	6	0	2	4	-7	2
35	Aberdeen	6	0	2	4	-11	2
36	Rapid Vienna	6	0	1	5	-11	1

Top eight advance to last 16, 9th to 24th enter play-offs, 25th to 36th eliminated

Turn to page 56 for the full knockout round draw

UEFA CLUB COMPETITIONS
Knockout round draws

The key dates for the knockout rounds of Europe's three elite club competitions

Champions League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 17-18
SECOND LEGS: February 24-25
Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain
Galatasaray v Juventus
Benfica v Real Madrid
Borussia Dortmund v Atalanta
Qarabag v Newcastle United
Club Brugge v Atletico Madrid
Bodo/Glimt v Internazionale
Olympiacos v Bayer Leverkusen

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 27
FIRST LEGS: March 10-11
SECOND LEGS: March 17-18
1. Monaco/PSG v Barcelona or Chelsea
2. Galatasaray/Juventus v Liverpool or Tottenham Hotspur
3. Benfica/Real Madrid v Sporting or Man City
4. Borussia Dortmund/Atalanta v Arsenal or Bayern Munich
5. Qarabag/Newcastle United v Chelsea or Barcelona
6. Club Brugge/Atletico Madrid v Tottenham Hotspur or Liverpool
7. Bodo/Glimt/Inter v Man City or Sporting
8. Olympiacos/Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich or Arsenal

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 7-8
SECOND LEGS: April 14-15
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 28-29
SECOND LEGS: May 5-6
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 30
Puskas Arena, Budapest

Europa League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 19
SECOND LEGS: February 26
Ludogorets v Ferencvaros
Panathinaikos v Viktoria Plzen
Dinamo Zagreb v Genk
PAOK v Celta Vigo
Celtic v Stuttgart
Fenerbahce v Nottingham Forest
Brann v Bologna
Lille v Red Star Belgrade

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 27
FIRST LEGS: March 12
SECOND LEGS: March 19
1. Ludogorets/Ferencvaros v Porto or Braga
2. Panathinaikos/Viktoria Plzen v Midtjylland or Real Betis
3. Dinamo Zagreb/Genk v Freiburg or Roma
4. PAOK/Celta Vigo v Lyon or Aston Villa
5. Celtic/Stuttgart v Braga or Porto
6. Fenerbahce/Nottingham Forest v Real Betis or Midtjylland
7. Brann/Bologna v Roma or Freiburg
8. Lille/Red Star Belgrade v Aston Villa or Lyon

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 9
SECOND LEGS: April 16
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 30
SECOND LEGS: May 7
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 20
Besiktas Stadium, Istanbul

Conference League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 19
SECOND LEGS: February 26
KuPS v Lech Poznan
Noah v AZ
Zrinjski Mostar v Crystal Palace
Jagiellonia Bialystok v Fiorentina
Shkendija v Samsunspor
Drita v Celje
Sigma Olomouc v Lausanne-Sport
Omonia v Rijeka

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 27
FIRST LEGS: March 12
SECOND LEGS: March 19
1. KuPS/Lech Poznan v Rayo Vallecano or Shakhtar Donetsk
2. Noah/AZ v AEK Athens or Sparta Prague
3. Zrinjski Mostar/Crystal Palace v Mainz or AEK Larnaca
4. Jagiellonia Bialystok/Fiorentina v Strasbourg or Rakow Czestochowa
5. Shkendija/Samsunspor v Shakhtar Donetsk or Rayo Vallecano
6. Drita/Celje v Sparta Prague or AEK Athens
7. Sigma Olomouc/Lausanne-Sport v AEK Larnaca or Mainz
8. Omonia/Rijeka v Rakow Czestochowa or Strasbourg

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 9
SECOND LEGS: April 16
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 30
SECOND LEGS: May 7
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 27
Red Bull Arena, Leipzig

WORLD CUP PLAY-OFFS

Previews of the inter-confederation and European play-offs, with six spots at North America 2026 still up for grabs

- **DR CONGO:** Africans ready to deliver? *p58*
- **NEW CALEDONIA:** Oceania's rank outsiders *p61*
- **JAMAICA:** God Speid to the Reggae Boyz *p61*
- **IRAQ:** Lions of Mesopotamia roaring again *p62*
- **BOLIVIA:** Another World Cup on US soil? *p63*
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- **EUROPE:** Italy, Northern Ireland, Wales & Bosnia & Herzegovina *p64*
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- **EUROPE:** Denmark, North Macedonia, Czech Republic & Republic of Ireland *p67*

AFRICA'S UNDERACHIEVERS READY TO DELIVER

Guadalajara is as far as the national team of the Democratic Republic of Congo have ever travelled, but it is in the Mexican city that the Central African nation have a strong chance of becoming the tenth representatives from their continent at this year's World Cup.

A victory in the inter-confederation play-offs against either Jamaica or New Caledonia is within their ambit and offers the Congolese a chance to begin living up to their enormous potential.

Should they qualify it would not be the first finals, but their debut in 1974, when the country was still known as Zaire, remains an appearance ridiculed for inadequate performances and a perceived naivety. They conceded 14 goals in their three group fixtures in the former West Germany and went home without scoring and in some ignominy.

More than a half century on, the Congolese are a much-changed outfit, with the current national side made up of a majority of European-born players from the country's diaspora. They are beginning to show more potential than they have offered since they won the last of their two Cup of Nations titles 52 years ago, just months before departing for West Germany.

The current side has been boosted by a number of talents from the Premier League: right-back Aaron Wan-Bissaka (West Ham United), centre-back Axel Tuanzebe (Burnley) and midfielder Noah Sadiki (Sunderland) are all first-team regulars. The captain and most capped international, Chancel Mbemba, now at Lille, spent three years with Newcastle United between 2015 and 2018, left-back Arthur Masuaku is at Lens on loan from Sunderland, while midfielder Gael Kakuta was once a prodigy at Chelsea.

Underachievers... are DR Congo finally ready to deliver on their potential?

Perhaps their biggest attacking threat is Yoane Wissa. The electric Newcastle United forward missed November's victorious African World Cup play-offs and the subsequent AFCON finals with a knee injury, which also stalled the start of his career at his new club. But now that he's fit again, his return will be a huge boost to the national team ahead of the crucial March ties.

Emphasising the squad's cosmopolitan make-up is the array of attacking players Wissa will join up with on his return. Cedric Bakambu, vice-captain and the current squad's top goalscorer, plays in Spain for Real Betis and has over 60 caps, as does Meschak Elia who is on the books of Alanyaspor in Turkey. The other attackers play all across the world: in Russia (Theo Bongonda, Spartak Moscow), France (Nathanael Mbuku, Montpellier),

Egypt (Fiston Mayele, Pyramids), Germany (Samuel Essende, Augsburg), Scotland (Michel-Ange Balikwisha, Celtic) and the United Arab Emirates (Simon Banza, Al Jazira).

That attacking unit was all part of the DR Congo squad for the recent Africa Cup of Nations, where they were unlucky to be eliminated by Algeria's stunning last-gasp goal in the last 16. In the previous finals, the 2023 edition in the Ivory Coast, the Congolese went all the way to the semi-finals.

More significantly, the Leopards edged past continental heavyweights Cameroon and Nigeria in November's African World Cup play-offs, keeping alive the dream of qualifying. Knocking out both the Indomitable Lions and Super Eagles was a major fillip for their confidence and evidence of their potential, bringing a spot alongside Portugal, Colombia and Uzbekistan in Group K ever closer.

Congolese football has a decent honours board but if the country's boundless resources are taken into account then they have punched under their weight for a long time.

"Congolese footballers are very talented with enormous skill," says Luc Eymael, who has worked at several clubs in the country over the past quarter-century, winning the domestic league title in 2010. The Belgian coach believes their home-based talent is as good as anywhere else on the continent.

Captain fantastic... Chancel Mbemba

> DR Congo edged past continental heavyweights Cameroon and Nigeria in November's African World Cup play-offs…a major fillip for their confidence and evidence of their potential

The country has some heavyweight clubs like five-time African champions TP Mazembe and AS Vita Club, who won the old-style African Champions Cup in 1973 and have been runners-up twice, most recently in 2014.

Support is on a fanatical scale. For the derby games in both the capital Kinshasa and the southern city of Lubumbashi, stands are packed hours before kick-off, even when the sun is baking down. In a phenomenon not seen in too many other countries, fans of Vita Club, for example, will attend the matches of their arch-rivals Daring Club Motema Pembe just to support their opponents. This happens even when one of them is in continental competition and playing against a club from another country.

But clubs' fortunes vacillate with political whims and machinations, as evidenced by the decline of Vita Club. After their long-time benefactor, the powerful army general Gabriel "Tango Four" Amisi, was removed from the club's presidency some years ago, he took over Maniema Union from his hometown of Kindu instead. As a result, they emerged from provincial anonymity to qualify for the group stage of the Champions League for the first time last season.

Military generals and provincial governors are all powerful presidents at the helm of clubs but as their prospects change, so too the fortunes of the clubs they run.

TP Mazembe were crowned champions of Africa in 1967 and 1968 but were down on their luck before Moise Katumbi took over as club president in 1997. Under his leadership, the club won three more CAF Champions Leagues and Katumbi, who made his money in the mining industry, was able to go into politics on the back

Premier League star...London-born Aaron Wan-Bissaka

Welcome party... supporters lined the streets of Kinshasa to celebrate the national team reaching the play-offs

of the popularity he gained in restoring Mazembe's long lost lustre.

He won election to the governorship of the mineral-rich Katanga province, but has been forced into exile since bidding to contest the country's presidential elections. Running Mazembe from afar has proven a lot more difficult and, having won 15 league titles from 2000 onwards, they have now lost their position of dominance.

In fact, they have not just been knocked off their perch as the top club in DR Congo but also in their own city of Lubumbashi, where Saint-Eloi Lupopo now have the ascendency. Lupopo are presided over by the current governor Jacques Katwe.

Vast distances in DR Congo are difficult to cover and pose a logistical nightmare. Air travel is needed to get to most provincial venues and several clubs from largely inaccessible towns prefer to camp in one of the major cities for months in order to compete their fixtures.

It is not uncommon for league matches to be postponed because a scheduled plane flight has not arrived or clubs have been unable to buy tickets. It is a constant battle to get the fixtures fulfilled and there is always a sense of relief at the end of the season when the championship is finally completed.

The top flight is back to being divided into two groups of 16 teams. Persistent arguments over promotion and relegation have seen the size of the league grow to levels that are hard to manage.

It did prove possible to run a single national league for four seasons between 2018 and 2021, and they had a lucrative sponsorship from a mobile company sponsor to boot, but vested interests have powerful sway.

> If the country's boundless resources are taken into account then they have punched under their weight for a long time

World Cup qualification holds out the prospect for a massive boost, although initially more in terms of confidence than substantive changes. Everything is intertwined with government from the football association to the clubs and to the sporting infrastructure.

With an estimated population of nearly 115 million, DR Congo is alive with people and potential. If they get to the World Cup and can harness some of that momentum, then there must be a chance to become a perennial force in the African game.

Mark Gleeson

AFCON semi-finalists ...DR Congo reached the last four in the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations in Ivory Coast

GOD SPEID TO THE REGGAE BOYZ

Reggae Boyz... Jamaica will be strong favourites for their clash with New Caledonia

For most teams still seeking a spot at the 2026 World Cup, the inter-confederation play-offs represents a second chance. But for Jamaica, there is a sinking feeling that their best shot at their first finals since France '98 ended in late 2025.

The "Reggae Boyz" were ranked 63rd in the world when CONCACAF drew their opponents for the third qualifying round. The second-best nation in their group, Curacao, were ranked 27 places lower, with a modest football programme and no history of appearances at showpiece tournaments. What could go wrong?

The simple answer to that is what has been plaguing the Jamaica national team for a while now: goals – or, to be more precise, the lack of them.

Under former head coach Steve McClaren, the Reggae Boyz failed to score in four of their eight competitive home matches, which included fixtures against fairly unheralded Caribbean opposition like Cuba and Curacao. Their total tally under the former England manager in qualifying was 15 goals in eight matches, although eight of them came against lowly Bermuda.

Much of Jamaica's offensive impotence stems from a lack of guile in their approach-play, which is especially evident against patient, organised teams. In the Europe-based quintet of Demarai Gray, Renaldo Cephas, Rumarn Burrell, Bobby Decordova-Reid and Leon Bailey – plus the Mexican-based forward Shamar Nicholson – Jamaica do not lack ability or athleticism in their front three. But beyond fast breaks, neither McClaren nor his predecessor, current Republic of Ireland coach Heimir Hallgrimsson, could fashion a team capable of line-breaking passes, overloads or the nous to create regular one-on-one chances for their gifted attackers.

Can Rudolph Speid, the interim head coach, do any better?

Speid, a Jamaican, is the Jamaica Football Federation's technical committee chairman and also coaches top local club, Cavalier. He is not short of confidence, but he is facing a massive step-up with little time to grow on the job.

The Reggae Boyz are desperately short of personality and cohesion, while the frequent injury-enforced absences of Bailey and Gray have not helped.

Should they get beyond 149th-ranked New Caledonia, Jamaica would be underdogs for the first time in this campaign when they face 56th-ranked African nation, DR Congo.

Can Speid get the Reggae Boyz to play the right tune?

Lasana Liburd

OCEANIA'S OUTSIDERS AIMING FOR '1% SHOT'

New Caledonia will be hoping to draw inspiration from Curacao and become the second non-sovereign nation to qualify for the World Cup, but they are under no illusions as to the size of the task.

French coach Johann Sidaner has openly admitted that *Les Cagous*' chances are "maybe 1%," but he insists his players will give their all. On paper, the extent of the challenge becomes obvious. Almost the entire squad is drawn from New Caledonia's Super Ligue and France's fifth tier; only midfielder Jekob Jeno has any experience of a top-flight European league, yet even he was released by Romanian outfit Unirea Slobozia in January.

Even reaching this stage must be considered an impressive achievement for New Caledonia who only became a FIFA member in 2004. The team from the French-controlled archipelago in the Pacific with a population of just 300,000 fought their way through to the final of Oceania's qualification tournament with wins over Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Tahiti before battling valiantly in a 3-0 final loss to New Zealand.

Oceania's outsiders ...New Caledonia beat Tahiti 3-0 to reach the play-offs

Since that disappointment in Auckland, New Caledonia have met with a familiar problem as they prepare for the inter-confederation play-offs: the difficulty of organising competitive friendlies. Their only outing since March 2025 was a 2-0 win over a Gibraltar side ranked 202nd in the world, 52 places below New Caledonia who sit in 150th. While that victory was a welcome confidence boost, Sidaner's side will face much stiffer tests in Guadalajara, Mexico. Qualification for the 2026 World Cup has already thrown up some incredible minnow stories, but should New Caledonia book their place it would be considered the greatest shock of all.

Paul Watson

LIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA ROARING AGAIN

Lions of Mesopotamia ...Iraq's Mohanad Ali celebrates the Asian play-off win over UAE

Iraq are just 90 minutes away from only their second World Cup. On March 31, the Lions of Mesopotamia will take on either Bolivia or Suriname in Monterrey, Mexico, with the winners returning to North America just weeks later for the 2026 tournament. It is fitting that it will all be decided in Mexico – it was in that country, 40 years ago, when the team made their first appearance.

On the pitch, the 1986 World Cup wasn't too bad. There were three defeats but those losses to Paraguay, Belgium and Mexico were all by one goal. Off the pitch, however, the memories are tainted by the fact that Uday Hussein, son of dictator Saddam, was in charge of the team. It wasn't fun for the players who lived in constant fear of punishment, humiliation and torture. Four decades on, much has changed.

The team had 20 qualification games, winning 12, finishing third in the third round behind South Korea and Jordan and then being plunged into the play-offs. They failed to book their spot in the fourth round due to scoring fewer goals than Saudi Arabia. That led to an Asian play-off with the United Arab Emirates in November, and a much-celebrated 3-2 aggregate win, with the decisive goal scored from the penalty spot by Amir Al Ammari in the 17th minute of added time.

Such steely nerves will be useful against Bolivia or Suriname who stand between a second appearance and a tough group that contains Norway, Senegal and France.

Graham Arnold won't mind that group. At the 2022 World Cup, he took Australia to the second round and gave Argentina a tough test. The 62-year-old started qualification for 2026 still in charge of the Socceroos but, after stepping down, took the Iraq job in March.

Part of his job Down Under was to be a cheerleader for football in a competitive sporting market, but in Iraq the challenge is keeping a lid on the pressure-cooker of the domestic game. "If ever a nation is desperate to qualify, this is it," he said in November.

> "If ever a nation is desperate to qualify, this is it"
> Iraq head coach Graham Arnold

He also has experience in the play-offs, having taken Australia down that route on the road to Qatar. Indeed, it was a big reason why Iraq came calling; while Arnold has lots of experience of big games outside Asia, Iraq do not. Being far from home may not be a disaster, however, as the passion and pressure back home can at times be overwhelming.

Experienced campaigner...Graham Arnold led Australia through the 2022 World Cup play-offs

Back in June, a win over South Korea in front of 55,000 fans in Basra would have put the team in the driving seat for an automatic World Cup place. Yet the occasion seemed to get to the players and it was not a surprise when Ali Al Hamadi was sent off for a rash challenge early in the game and the home team ended up losing 2-0.

The atmosphere on the neutral soil of Mexico will be less intense and Iraq fancy their chances of getting a result. The plan is to spend as much time as possible in the Americas with the domestic-based players and then those from overseas will join as soon as they can.

There are a growing number of exports. Some earned moves abroad, such as winger Ali Jasim who joined Como in 2024 and is now on loan in Saudi Arabia. Others were born abroad to an Iraqi parent, such as Zidane Iqbal who came up through the ranks at Manchester United and is now with Utrecht in the Netherlands.

With Arnold at the helm, this is now a team with plenty of international experience and no small amount of talent. In all the years since 1986, Iraq have never been so close to a return. The nation will be watching.

John Duerden

BOLIVIA AIM FOR ANOTHER WORLD CUP ON US SOIL

If they can get through Suriname and then Iraq in March, Bolivia will make it through to their first World Cup since 1994, when the tournament was also hosted in the United States. This has engendered a state of nervous euphoria in the country – dampened a little by warm-up friendlies in January, when, in probably their last home games before the vital play-offs, Bolivia drew 1-1 with Panama and lost 1-0 to Mexico.

These were not FIFA dates, and so none of the sides involved were at full strength. But Bolivia were close enough for conclusions to be drawn, and for coach Oscar Villegas there were some pieces of good news. The biggest was the consolidation of Fernando Nava on the left wing. Introduced to the national team in November, Nava showed plenty of drive and attacking threat. And then there was the return of midfielder Ramiro Vaca, probably Bolivia's best player, making a welcome comeback after eight months out following a failed drug test, a sanction applied despite the fact that CONMEBOL accepted the contamination was "involuntary".

The Panama game was staged in Tarija, in the south of the country, which happens to be Vaca's hometown. He looked understandably rusty – a move to Wydad Casablanca should give him game time before March – but it was his free-kick that set up the equaliser against Panama.

Back from suspension ...Bolivia midfielder Ramiro Vaca in action v Mexico in January

This was an important moment. After beating Jordan 1-0 in Turkey back in October, Bolivia had gone four games – against Russia, South Korea, Japan and Peru – without a goal, and they would go one more, losing a tight game 1-0 to Mexico in Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

All-time top scorer Marcelo Martins Moreno, who retired from international football after six rounds of the World Cup qualifying campaign, has yet to be adequately replaced. There is an air of desperation about the search for a centre-forward, with Villegas having a late look at veterans such as the nationalised Paraguayan Juan Godoy.

It is also true that Bolivia's qualifying campaign relied heavily on the home advantage provided by playing at the heights of El Alto, with four of their six wins coming at the ground which sits over 4,000 metres above sea level. Away from such high altitude, their record is far less impressive.

Still, some of the euphoria has survived, with a Bolivian TV station closing its coverage of the Mexico game with the reassuring message: "Our fate is in our hands."

Tim Vickery

SURINAME TARGET FINAL SURPRISE IN PLAY-OFFS

Suriname have taken their fans on an incredible adventure during the 2026 World Cup qualifying series.

At the time of the draw for the third and final CONCACAF qualifying round, Suriname were stark outsiders. Then ranked 137th in the world, they trailed the other three nations in the group by some distance: Panama (33rd), El Salvador (81st) and Guatemala (106th).

Yet, thanks to an open-door policy to second and third-generation Dutch citizens of Surinamese heritage, plus the leadership of an astute coach in Stanley Menzo, the *Natio* entered the final round of matches as group leaders.

After a 4-0 win over El Salvador, Menzo did not have a good day at the office in the final game against Guatemala. After 65 minutes, his side were 3-0 down to a team already out of contention. However, a stoppage-time own goal by Guatemala defender Nicolas Samayoa saw the Caribbean side salvage a play-off spot as one of the best second-place teams.

Menzo, Suriname's own tinker man, paid the price for the nation's sky-high football ambitions. He made four changes to his team between the first and second game of the window, as had been the norm during his tenure. His bold tactical tweaks worked wonders, until they no longer did – and they cost him his job.

Enter Henk ten Cate: a self-described "street fighter" with real pedigree in the game, after coaching spells at Chelsea, Barcelona and Ajax – albeit mostly as an assistant. Also drafted in as part of the set-up is Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, the Surinamese-born ex-Netherlands striker, who was recently part of Gareth Southgate's England coaching staff.

Caribbean surprise packages...Suriname snuck into the play-offs ahead of Honduras on goals scored

Suriname, ranked 47 places below Bolivia and 65 spots below Iraq, will continue in their role as underdogs, but should not be underestimated.

Ten Cate inherits a mature, tactically fluid team that is capable of playing on the front or back foot. The stars include technically gifted midfielder Tjaronn Chery, powerful forward Richonell Margaret and goalkeeper Etienne Vaessen, but there is potential for more to join them. Menzo introduced two new naturalised players in each match window during World Cup qualifiers, and if ten Cate follows suit by injecting some more quality into the CONCACAF underdogs, then Suriname could spring their biggest surprise yet in the 2026 inter-confederation play-offs.

Lasana Liburd

ITALY FEAR THE WORST AHEAD OF ANOTHER WORLD CUP PLAY-OFF

Under pressure... Gennaro Gattuso took the Italy job in June

In real danger of a third consecutive failure to make the World Cup, four-time champions Italy are living with acute trepidation as they prepare to face Northern Ireland in the Path A semi-final in Bergamo.

The *Azzurri*, arguably as vulnerable as they have ever been, were humiliatingly tripped up in World Cup play-offs in both 2018 and 2022 and just to make their nerves jangle even more, recently had to shelve plans for a training camp in February, a month before the Northern Ireland encounter. Head coach Gennaro Gattuso, mindful that his side have not played since losing 4-1 at home to Norway in a qualifier in November, was very much in favour of the idea, his fingers crossed that a degree of domestic fixture rescheduling would free up space in the calendar. Sadly for Gattuso, the Italian federation and the league were unable to oblige.

Much of the talk in Italy at the moment centres on how Gattuso freshens up his squad. One course of action would be to blood some impressive youngsters, with full-backs Davide Bartesaghi of Milan and Marco Palestra, currently on loan at Cagliari from Atalanta, among the most mentioned. Gattuso could also play the recall game, restoring Liverpool winger Federico Chiesa or Fiorentina midfielder Nicolo Fagioli to the fold following lengthy absences.

> The *Azzurri*, arguably as vulnerable as they have ever been, were humiliatingly tripped up in World Cup play-offs in both 2018 and 2022

In a major blow to Northern Ireland's hopes of reaching their first World Cup since 1986, outstanding Liverpool right-back Conor Bradley will be unavailable, his season ended in January by a serious knee injury.

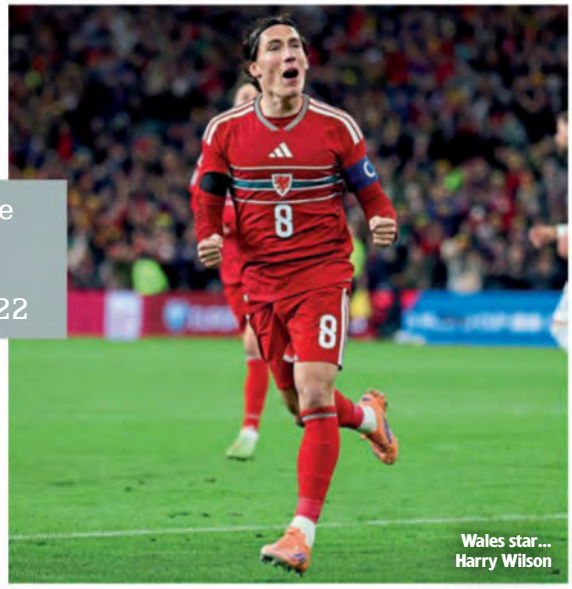
What the Ulstermen especially will be banking on is their physicality. Gattuso, a pitbull of a midfielder in his playing days, has repeatedly described the visitors' muscular approach as their number one asset.

The winner of the Italy-Northern Ireland showdown will travel to either Wales or Bosnia & Herzegovina for the do-or-die decider.

Wales will inevitably start as favourites against Bosnia, and not just because of home advantage. The Dragons have clearly been galvanised by the stewardship of head coach Craig Bellamy who, in a remarkable transformation, has gone from a spiky, combustible striker to a thoughtful and astute leader of men. Fulham attacking midfielder Harry Wilson, who netted a hat-trick in their last competitive game – a 7-1 thrashing of North Macedonia in qualifying Group J in November – could be their trump card.

Yet Bosnia & Herzegovina, intelligently marshalled by coach Sergej Barbarez, have to be respected. A cohesive, combative unit, they came close to pipping Austria to automatic qualification from Group H and, in the form of evergreen front-man Edin Dzeko at the point of attack, they have a proven international marksman. Another threat is winger or attacking midfielder Esmir Bajraktarevic, a bundle of brilliant ball skills, who currently stars for PSV.

Nick Bidwell



Wales star... Harry Wilson

POTTER TASKED WITH SWEDISH REVIVAL

In Path B, the semi-final between Ukraine and Sweden in Valencia is, on the face of it, something of a mismatch. While Ukraine, hoping to qualify for their first World Cup since 2006, amassed a healthy ten points in finishing second to France in Group D, a surprisingly shambolic Sweden were winless and hapless in propping up the rest in Group B. They might claim that their motivation during that campaign was somewhat diminished by the knowledge that, thanks to topping their pool in the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League, they already had a play-off spot secured.

New Sweden boss Graham Potter, who took over from the sacked Jon Dahl Tomasson last November, clearly has his work cut out to improve morale and team cohesion. Despite a chequered time working in the UK at Swansea City, Brighton, Chelsea and West Ham United, Potter has a well-earned reputation in Swedish football as a miracle worker, the man who not so long ago took unheralded Ostersunds from the fourth tier to the top flight. The Swedes are by no means bereft of talent, the most prominent examples being Arsenal striker Viktor Gyokeres, Borussia Dortmund wing-back Daniel Svensson, immensely versatile Eintracht Frankfurt midfielder Hugo Larsson and centre-back Isak Hien from Atalanta – though Liverpool striker Alexander Isak misses out through injury.

Ukraine, scheduled to stay in Valencia for the final should they see off Sweden, will be praying for inspiration from their Iberian-based stars: the Girona pairing of right-winger Viktor Tsyhankov and striker Vladyslav Vanat, plus Benfica aces Anatoliy Trubin in goal and attacking midfielder Heorhiy Sudakov. The exciting 24-year-old Vanat has been particularly sharp for Girona of late.

In the other half of Path B, Poland will do battle with Albania in Warsaw, a match-up that could turn out to be much tighter than many imagine. The Poles, participants in nine World Cup finals compared to Albania's zero, may have the pedigree and home advantage, but they have tended to blow hot and cold for quite some time, perhaps too reliant on the contribution of superstar centre-forward Robert Lewandowski (85 goals in 163 internationals). New coach Jan Urban needs to find a real, fully-functioning collective, rather than Lewandowski plus nine outfield helpers.

New Sweden boss... Graham Potter's third game in charge will be against Ukraine

> New Sweden boss Graham Potter clearly has his work cut out to improve morale and team cohesion

Poland's talisman ...the Polish team still revolves around Robert Lewandowski

Under Urban's predecessor, Michal Probierz – who was shown the door last summer after stripping Lewandowski of the captaincy and prompting the latter to temporarily walk away from the national team – Poland often seemed to suffer from a distinct lack of creativity. Urban must right that wrong as a matter of the utmost urgency.

With Brazilian coach Sylvinho setting the tone, Albania are well organised and feisty, they have lots of technical ability, and boast a mile-wide streak of drive and ambition. The last time they faced the Poles, back in September 2023, they came out on top, winning 2-0 in Tirana. A good omen? Time will tell.

Nick Bidwell

HOME ADVANTAGE GIVES SLOVAKIA THE EDGE

All that separates Slovakia from just their second taste of World Cup ambrosia as an independent nation is a pair of home wins in Path C, starting with a duel against Kosovo in Bratislava and then, if still standing, entertaining Turkey or Romania on the same ground in the final. The Slovaks are rightly optimistic; they have not lost a competitive game in their own backyard since a 1-0 defeat to Portugal in September 2023.

In his three-and-a-half year tenure with Slovakia, Italian Francesco Calzona – once a long-term collaborator of compatriot Maurizio Sarri – has, to his immense credit, built a national team with the camaraderie and collective understanding of a club side, expertly drilled in transition mode, robust and tough when defending their box and wedded to a well-defined counter-attacking plan, generally aiming to unleash the ability on the flanks of Leo Sauer, David Strelec and Lukas Haraslin.

Only defeated once en route to finishing runners-up to Switzerland in Group B, Kosovo are anything but lightweights, having improved year on year since joining FIFA and UEFA back in 2016. They have a burning desire to reach their first-ever major tournament and certainly will not be overawed by the prospect of a high-stakes clash in Slovakia. Perfectly able to soak up pressure prior to clinically turning the tables, the Kosovans are an opportunistic bunch and boast a gaggle of potential match-winners in the experienced Mallorca front-man Vedat Muriqi, young Berlin-born attacker Fisnik Asllani, who plays in the Bundesliga for Hoffenheim, and classy midfielder Florent Muslija (Fortuna Dusseldorf, on loan from Freiburg).

Turkey, meanwhile, must fancy their chances in their clash with Romania in Istanbul. The former have gone from strength to strength since the former Roma and Italy striker Vincenzo Montella was handed the national team reins in the autumn of 2023, improving them in virtually every area: far more assured on the ball than they used to be, sharper in the attacking third and defending with greater steel. Seven wins out of ten in 2025 was a record to be proud of, with Kenan Yildiz (Juventus), Arda Guler (Real Madrid) and versatile forward Kerem Akturkoglu (Fenerbahce) providing most of the attacking pizzazz. Turkey have not been to the World Cup party since 2002, when they pulled off a stunning third-place finish.

Bratislava fortress... Slovakia defeated Germany at home in September

> The Slovaks are rightly optimistic; they have not lost a competitive game in their own backyard since September 2023

Turkish delights... Kenan Yildiz and Arda Guler form part of a dangerous front line

Their opponents Romania, once a mighty force in the European game, have been in the World Cup wilderness for even longer, no shows in the last six tournaments. Compared to the deep reservoir of brilliance they were able to exploit in years gone by, the flow is now a drip and 80-year-old Romania coach Mircea Lucescu, a technical area institution who has plied his trade all over the continent, will require all his wiles to mastermind an upset. Lucescu's secret weapon? His extensive knowledge of Turkish football, having coached their national team as well as club sides Galatasaray and Besiktas.

Nick Bidwell

PARROTT IRELAND'S MAN OF THE MOMENT

Key man...can Troy Parrott be the Republic of Ireland's saviour again?

The Republic of Ireland's reward for an extraordinary finish to their qualifying campaign – sensationally keeping their World Cup dream alive by beating Portugal and Hungary in their last two ties – is a play-off semi-final in Prague against Czech Republic, with the winners due to host Denmark or North Macedonia in the Path D final. After rising from the dead in such a glorious fashion, Republic of Ireland inevitably see themselves as a team of destiny and they will be banking on more timely heroics from AZ Alkmaar striker Troy Parrott, who scored all five of the side's goals in those dramatic Portugal and Hungary victories, including the last-gasp winner versus the Magyars in Budapest. In more good news for Ireland coach Heimir Hallgrimsson, veteran midfielder or wing-back Robbie Brady is reported to be edging towards full fitness after calf surgery.

This clash in Prague will be the first game in charge for new Czech national team boss Miroslav Koubek, who was only appointed to the post in December. Koubek, previously in charge of top Czech outfits Banik Ostrava, Slavia Prague and Viktoria Plzen, has been busy poring over recent videos of Hallgrimsson's team in action and was happy to offer his verdict to local reporters: "The Irish are a team with heart. They play simple straightforward football and they are very aggressive and intense."

Denmark absolutely owe their supporters a positive reaction after seemingly throwing away direct World Cup qualification last autumn. Within touching distance of securing their ticket, they mysteriously imploded, the damage done by a 2-2 draw at home to Belarus and a morale-shattering 4-2 defeat in Scotland, a match in which they conceded twice in added time. After four months of bitter self-analysis, the Danes now have a shot at redemption, two do-or-die games with the pressure meter at maximum. Denmark coach Brian Riemer continues to insist that his side were the best in their first-phase group. His job in March is to turn that belief into something more tangible.

> Republic of Ireland will be banking on more timely heroics from AZ Alkmaar striker Troy Parrott

Implosion...will Denmark bounce back from their 4-2 defeat in Scotland?

Everyone connected to the North Macedonia camp is adamant that sooner or later the Lions – whose only major tournament appearance so far came at Euro 2020 – will break their World Cup finals duck. They came within a whisker of doing so in the 2022 campaign, strong enough to beat Germany away in the group stage and sensationally beating Italy in the opening play-off round before falling at the final hurdle to Portugal. They may have only finished third in their 2026 qualifying pool – owing their play-off berth to good work in the Nations League – but remain a hard nut to crack, full of application, bravery and purpose. The North Macedonians opted to sweep clean with a new leadership broom at the turn of the year, replacing head coach Blagoja Milevski with former long-serving national team centre-back Goce Sedloski, with the rationale that Sedloski is a "fighter".

Nick Bidwell

SEBASTIEN DESABRE

"The main goal remains World Cup qualification, after more than 50 years of waiting"

After guiding his team to the knockout rounds of the Africa Cup of Nations in Morocco, the Democratic Republic of Congo head coach looks ahead to March's World Cup inter-confederation play-off

At the end of March, you'll travel to Mexico for the World Cup inter-confederation play-off...
Our goal of reaching the World Cup finals is not yet achieved, but we did succeed in beating teams higher than us in the FIFA rankings in Cameroon and Nigeria. It shows there is progression. We started at 75th in the rankings and now we're up to 48th. There's still a long way to go, but we're moving forward. The main goal remains World Cup qualification, after more than 50 years of waiting. That's what we've been working towards for three and a half years.

Why has the DR Congo national team underachieved for so long?
The organisation, the infrastructure and sporting projects are all well behind international standards. On occasion local players are almost punished by playing in the local league, where the level is not good enough for them to develop. There are an incredible number of good Congolese players, both domestically and outside the country. It's a massive country with a time difference between east and west and getting to all corners is not easy. Key to moving the game forward is professionalism. For over three years, there's been no elected federation, just a normalisation committee of four people appointed by FIFA. The day a strong, independent federation is in place, with a real technical department and resources for youth, everything will take off again, that's clear. That's the foundation of any successful football system.

Do you worry about being too over-reliant on players from the diaspora?
Because the DRC rarely enters junior teams in FIFA competition, they are far behind the rest of the continent, and there is no proper route for the home-based players. That's why there are so many Congolese youngsters playing in the junior national teams of other countries. We should be offering the same opportunity at junior level as the other countries because with the quality we could use, we could be playing at the age-group World Cups. That will become very important in the coming years.

How do you go about recruiting players from the diaspora?
We talk to the youngsters and tell them how we work, what our potential is. It is understandable that many hesitate about whether they want to play for Belgium or France, for example, or for DR Congo. I don't put them under pressure. We ask only total motivation, discipline and engagement. That they play for DR Congo with heart because the strength of our team is our strong cohesion. I don't have any stars or egos to manage. Today, the organisation of the national team is top-level, and you can see it on the pitch. The Congolese all have a tight connection with their country.

You led DR Congo to two consecutive Cup of Nations finals. How do you explain the positive progress of the national team?
Professionalising the structure around the national team, instilling discipline, and real game rigour. But also providing an environment where players can fully express themselves, with standards close to what they're used to at their clubs. It's a lot of hard work. I'm well supported, with a quality staff and a government that's very invested in the team. And, most importantly, there are some very talented players with a highly professional attitude. All these factors combined allowed us to put together a coherent project. Congolese football, with its mix of dual nationals and local players, deserves this recognition.

Who are the key players in your team?
Chancel Mbemba is a natural leader. He doesn't need to say much. His attitude and professionalism lift the whole group, especially the younger players. I took the decision in the end to leave Yoane Wissa out of the Cup of Nations squad so that he had the best possible conditions to recover properly because we need him in the best form for the World Cup play-off. It was a difficult decision, and I know he was disappointed not to be in Morocco with his team-mates, but he understood. I'm lucky to rely on key players who are deeply committed to the country. We might have good or bad days on the pitch, but this team never lacks resilience or fighting spirit. These players love their country. As long as they can serve the nation, they're here.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

FRANCO FODA

"We want to qualify for the World Cup"

Ten years on from the Kosovo national team becoming FIFA members, their head coach looks ahead to their first-ever World Cup play-off

Kosovo were drawn from Pot 4 in 2026 World Cup qualifying, yet you finished as runners-up in Group B and secured a slot in the play-offs. What was the key for this success?
The key for success was intensity, tactical discipline, mental strength and team spirit. Success arises when the idea for the play, the player types and team character all fit together. We had a clear team identity and we acted in each phase of the play as a team. That's what made us stand out.

After your previous jobs with Sturm Graz, the Austria national team and FC Zurich, what were your thoughts when you were first offered the job as Kosovo's national coach?
A job as national coach is always interesting and something special. As a national coach, you don't just represent one team but a whole country – and that's a big honour. That's why the post as national coach of Kosovo was very attractive for me.

What were the biggest challenges for you and your coaching team in the beginning?
As a new coach, it's a big challenge to instil identity, values, rules and a clear idea of playing in a short space of time. It's decisive to transmit to everybody all ideas clearly, simply, consequently and understandably.

How about the language barrier?
In the communication with the players and with officials of the federation, there is no problem at all. It functions without an interpreter. The communication is in English and many players also speak German.

What are the strong points of your team and what would you like to improve?
Our strength is that in all phases of the play we act as a team. Of course, like with any team, there is always something to improve. We will continue working on our principles when we have ball possession and in the play against the ball. It's about compactness, distances, mutual defending, behaving at pressing, transition, running paths and play in the attacking third.

One of the foundations for success for Croatia, for example, has been the national pride of a young and independent state. Is this a similar case with Kosovo?
Kosovo is a proud country with big passion, identity and unity. Each player is proud when he wears the national jersey of Kosovo. You can feel that in each moment.

You have also been able to call upon several players from the Kosovan diaspora...
I was always in close contact with the players who were eligible to play for Kosovo. For a player it can be a difficult and very personal decision to decide which country to play for. Therefore, it was important for me to talk openly about the prospects of the national team of Kosovo, but at the same time not to apply any pressure. It's a question of the heart, the identity and the emotion. I'm very glad that some players have decided with full conviction to play for Kosovo.

You regularly attend matches in Kosovo's Superliga, but for the time being you have selected almost exclusively players who are with foreign clubs...
I follow a lot of games in Kosovo's Superliga. There are many interesting players there, with big potential for development. Young, talented players sign relatively quickly with clubs abroad, like, for example, Lumbardh Dellova [now at CSKA Sofia, Bulgaria], Ilir Krasniqi and Lindon Emerllahu [both at Polissya, Ukraine], or Dion Gallapeni [Widzew Lodz, Poland]. But those players were already with the national team before they signed with foreign clubs. We are always searching for players from the domestic league. However, potential candidates must show quality and development.

Under your guidance, Kosovo have won promotion to League B in the UEFA Nations League and reached the 2026 World Cup play-offs. Then in June 2025, you rejected a lucrative offer from Emirati club Al Wahda. You must be a national hero in these parts – do they let you pay your bill when you go for a meal in Pristina?
I rejected the offer from Al Wahda because I had a running contract and because I felt responsibility and commitment towards my players. We still have goals that we want to reach together. It's true that people in Kosovo are very hospitable, but I do pay for my meals!

How do you rate the chances of your team in the play-off match against Slovakia?
After the last away victories, of course we have lot of confidence. The chances are 50-50.

If you win against Slovakia, you will have a home game against Turkey or Romania. Which of them would you prefer to play?
If we win in Slovakia, it doesn't matter who we play at home afterwards. We want to qualify for the World Cup – and for that we have to win two matches.

If Kosovo do qualify for the World Cup, you will play in Group D with the United States, Paraguay and Australia. What do you think about this potential group?
That would be a very exciting and balanced group.

Which coaches have left the biggest mark on you as a player and coach?
As a coach it's important for me to follow my own path and to realise my own ideas. Ivica Osim [Foda's former coach at Sturm Graz] was a great coach, and he was very successful in Graz. I was especially impressed with his humane approach to dealing with the players.

In your home country, Germany, you are apparently off the radar. Do you feel sorry that you have only worked one season in Germany, with Kaiserslautern in 2012-13? Would you like one day to coach a club in the Bundesliga?
If I would receive an offer from Germany, naturally I would consider it. But at the moment, I'm very satisfied and happy with my work as national coach of Kosovo.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Glenn Moore

Arsenal crowned world champions

The Gunners become women's football's first-ever world club champions after victory over Corinthians of Brazil

The inaugural FIFA Women's Champions Cup may have been flawed – but it mattered.

Issues over scheduling, location and preparation were all forgotten as Arsenal lifted the trophy at a rain-soaked Emirates Stadium. Their joy was genuine, as was Corinthians and their passionate fans' disappointment at coming second.

The new event's importance was shown, too, in the lengthy preparation of Gotham FC, who came third, and the enthusiastic involvement of outgunned AS FAR, the other beaten semi-finalists.

In a gripping final, Corinthians had twice celebrated wildly after equalisers from veteran Gabi Zanotti and Vic Albuquerque, the latter a last-gasp penalty, cancelled out goals by Olivia Smith and Lotte Wubben-Moy. But Australia's Caitlin Foord struck on the counter midway through extra-time to crown Arsenal world champions.

Are the Gunners the best team in the world? Probably not, given they have not won the English league title since 2019 and will not this year either with Manchester City looking likely to usurp serial WSL winners Chelsea.

But equally, neither are Chelsea men, winners of the inaugural FIFA Club World Cup last year. The Blues last won the Premier League in 2017 and won't this year. Winning titles is a matter of timing as well as quality and in winning the Champions League last May, ending the nine-year duopoly of OL Lyonnes and Barcelona, Arsenal's timing was perfect.

There are plenty in the United States who will argue that the Gunners were also fortunate with the timing of this competition, which fell mid-season for them but pre-season for Gotham FC, who were surprisingly beaten in the semi-final 1-0 by Corinthians.

Ann-Katrin Berger, whose uncharacteristic handling error gifted the Brazilian club victory in that match, suggested the lack of match sharpness was responsible, and her team-mate Jess Carter also criticised the scheduling.

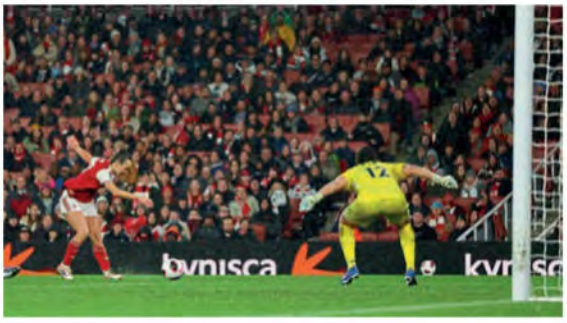
They may have a point, but it is never going to be easy to find a time that suits all in the crowded football calendar. Not many voices Stateside complain about scheduling when the US win World Cups during their mid-season, against Europeans drained by having to extend a long campaign another month or two.

Besides, South American champions Corinthians were also in pre-season, and unlike Gotham had not spent time preparing in Spain, including warm-ups against Bayern Munich and BK Hacken. Meanwhile, the United States national team were playing two internationals at the same time.

> Are the Gunners the best team in the world? Probably not, given they have not won the English league title since 2019

Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that Arsenal's advantage was compounded by the last-four stage being held in London, enabling them to use their own superb training facilities, and with the final at their own North London stadium.

This did ensure a decent crowd, including a vocal contingent of Corinthians fans, mostly UK-based.



Winning goal...Caitlin Foord strikes home in extra-time for Arsenal

Some respected voices, highlighting these flaws, argued that the women's game is not yet ready for this event, but it has to start somewhere. The early years of most competitions, including the men's World Cup, European Championship and Champions League, had unsatisfactory elements but they each grew into major events.

In many respects, this competition is more important for the women's game globally than the men's equivalent. Especially when it becomes a 16-team Women's Club World Cup – currently proposed for January 2028.

The larger number of teams involved means that it will be even harder to shoehorn into the calendar with European leagues already arguing against it being held in January. The venue may also be contentious if reports that Qatar is under consideration are true – the Gulf state's women's team haven't played a match for more than a decade.

It remains to be seen what rewards will be on offer for that tournament but the prize money at the Women's FIFA Champions Cup was generous by the standards of the women's game. Arsenal earned £1.7 million as winners, while runners-up Corinthians collected £750,000. The semi-finalists each received £150,000, though in Gotham's case that is unlikely to have covered their preparation costs.

While prize money carries the risk of distorting domestic competitions, it also acts as an incentive to rivals. Additionally, there is the prestige and media focus, which will perhaps be more significant

World champions ...Kim Little and Leah Williamson lift the FIFA Women's Champions Cup trophy

outside Europe where FIFA competitions like this are more highly prized.

Wuhan Jiangda, the Asian champions, and Oceania's Auckland United were also in the competition but got knocked out in qualifying by AS FAR. But the Moroccans were then thrashed 6-0 by Arsenal, who were 3-0 up inside 21 minutes at Brentford. That followed the only upset with Gotham surprised by Corinthians, confounding the expectations of an NWSL-WSL showdown.

While Gotham are far from the best team in the NWSL, having finished 29 points behind Shield winners Kansas City Current last year, the league's play-off system threw them up as champions – as it did in 2023, setting in motion their qualification for this event by winning the 2024-25 CONCACAF W Champions Cup. Their failure was a blow to the NWSL's prestige, which a 4-0 dispatch of AS FAR in the third-place play-off did little to ameliorate.

Conversely, Corinthians' impressive showing highlighted the current quality of Brazilian football. *Timao* have won the last six league titles, but there is plenty of depth behind them and they don't dominate in the way that Barcelona do in Spain for example.

Following on from the national team's run to the final of the 2024 Olympics, it was another performance that augurs well for Brazil's 2027 World Cup hosting.

"Now, 30 minutes after the final whistle, we are frustrated that we didn't beat the European champions," said coach Lucas Piccinato. "But tomorrow, we will be proud."

Round-up

Australia star ...Sam Kerr

MATILDAS HOPE KERR RETURN SPARKS ASIAN CUP TRIUMPH

Australia will launch the 50th anniversary Asian Cup in front of an anticipated 60,000 full house in Perth on March 1, with the Philippines, coached by Australian Mark Torcaso, billed as the sacrificial lambs. Joe Montemurro's team, bolstered by Sam Kerr's return, should cruise out of Group A, which also features Iran and South Korea.

Defending champions China are expected to head Group B with North Korea, ahead of Bangladesh and Uzbekistan. But the tournament favourites are Japan, who have even more WSL players in their squad than Australia. The *Nadeshiko* are in Group C with Vietnam, India and Chinese Taipei.

With the winners of Groups A and C set to meet in the semi-final, Australia, eager to revive the fan fever of the 2023 World Cup, might be better served coming second if they are to reach the final in Sydney on March 21.

There is unhappiness at the failure to increase the prize money, which at US$1.8 million is now the lowest of the five main continental competitions. The men's equivalent hosted in early 2024 awarded $14.8m in prize money and participation fees.

WUHAN'S ASIAN TITLE DEFENCE CONTINUES AGAINST SUWON

2025-26 Asian Champions League group winners Wuhan Jiangda (China), Melbourne City (Australia) and Tokyo Verdy Beleza (Japan) will host single-leg quarter-finals against Suwon (South Korea), Nasaf (Uzbekistan) and Stallion Laguna (Philippines) respectively. The other tie, with all the last eight clashes to be played March 28-29, is between Naegohyang (North Korea) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). The semi-finals and final take place May 20 and 23.

WORLD CUP QUALIFYING SET TO GET UNDERWAY IN EUROPE

With qualifying for the 2027 World Cup in Brazil already underway in Oceania and South America, and Asia, Africa and CONCACAF's continental competitions providing the pathway for their nations, Europe will commence their qualifying tournament in March. The pick of the early action sees Italy host both Sweden and Denmark, and Norway play Germany, while April brings some big clashes as Netherlands face France, and England take on holders Spain.

Record breaker... Grace Geyoro

GEYORO WORLD'S HIGHEST TRANSFER, COFFEY LEAVES NWSL

FIFA's annual transfer report revealed Grace Geyoro's move from PSG to London City Lionesses to be the women's transfer record, eclipsing the £1.1m Orlando Pride paid Tigres for Mexico forward Lizbeth Ovalle.

The biggest deal in January took US international Sam Coffey from Portland Thorns to Manchester City for an initial £640,000. Brazil's Ludmila left Chicago Red Stars for San Diego for £580,000, with a potential £150,000 in add-ons.

JANUARY WINDOW ROUND-UP

Ary BORGES	*(Racing Louisville to Angel City)*
Delphine CASCARINO	*(San Diego Wave to London City Lionesses)*
Janice CAYMAN	*(Leicester City to PSV)*
Grace CHANDA	*(Orlando Pride to Queretaro)*
Ana-Maria CRNOGORCEVIC	*(Seattle Reign to Strasbourg)*
Lucia DI GUGLIELMO	*(Roma to Washington Spirit)*
GEYSE	*(Manchester United to Club America)*
Valentina GIACINTI	*(Galatasaray to Como)*
Sofia JAKOBSSON	*(London City Lionesses to Toluca)*
Oriane JEAN-FRANCOIS	*(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*
Alisha LEHMANN	*(Como to Leicester City)*
Denise O'SULLIVAN	*(North Carolina Courage to Liverpool)*
Lea SCHULLER	*(Bayern Munich to Manchester United)*
Kailen SHERIDAN	*(San Diego Wave to North Carolina Courage)*
Ana VITORIA	*(Atletico Madrid to Corinthians)*

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2025 Africa Cup of Nations squad lists...all the teams

Unforgettable final ends with Senegal success

Sadio Mane leads his team to second AFCON win in four years after messy climax

Whatever the rankings say, whatever Morocco's World Cup heroics may suggest, two titles across the last three editions of the Africa Cup of Nations set Senegal apart from the pack. With a burgeoning fount of talent, they could continue to be successful even in a post-Sadio Mane era.

Mane, who turns 34 in April, again proved a talismanic influence, winning the Player of the Tournament award for the second time and earning plenty of other kudos for his role in preventing a final catastrophe.

Senegal's success was obviously soured by the histrionics and unseemly walk-off that followed the penalty decision against them, deep into stoppage time of the final. It seems a pity that such a formidable team's success will forever have that asterisk hanging over their place on the continent's roll of honour.

For his part in the walk-off, Senegal head coach Pape Thiaw was handed a five-match ban and players Ismaila Sarr and Iliman Ndiaye got two games each, but this only applies when the next Cup of Nations qualifiers kick off in September, leaving both free to play at this summer's World Cup.

But, having secured the trophy, the Lions of Teranga wont care about that.

Even after this success, it is dangerous to predict any side could take on dynastic qualities and go on to dominate the African footballing landscape. After all, inconsistency is a hallmark of the continent's game.

But Senegal have the potential, even if Mane says he has played his last Cup of Nations and will likely retire from international football after the World Cup along with 36-year-old midfielder Idrissa Gana Gueye and 34-year-old captain Kalidou Koulibaly.

The former two played a colossal role in Senegal's success here despite their age, but Koulibaly managed to get himself suspended twice in a single tournament and missed the final.

No matter, however, as in came the 20-year-old Mamadou Sarr, whose father was in the squad when Senegal made their breakthrough onto the international stage at the 2002 World Cup. Sarr, who was recently recalled by Chelsea from his loan spell at Strasbourg,

Champions of Africa... Sadio Mane lifts the trophy for Senegal

had only debuted for Senegal a month before the tournament but stepped up imperiously and will now be hard to dislodge from the centre-back role.

He was one of many who shone through the month of action in Morocco, which saw other young players force their way into the team and which suggests Senegal could yet go on and win a few more continental titles in the years to come.

Other young players like Sunderland's Habib Diarra, bouncing back after groin surgery in September, the 21-year-old West Ham United left-back El Hadji Malick Diouf and Monaco midfielder Lamine Camara all took their chances to forge a place in the starting line-up after starting the tournament as replacements.

And then there was the emergence of Ibrahim Mbaye, who only turned 18 in the week after the final but had already sat on the bench for last May's UEFA Champions League final and is now starting more consistently for Paris Saint-Germain. He was Senegal's joker off the bench, coming on in all but one of their seven games in Morocco and each time making a solid contribution. Mbaye looks like he could take over Mane's role as a dynamic force off the flank and become a mainstay of the team for some time to come.

Looking back over winning squads at Cup of Nations finals over the past two decades, this Senegal outfit has the most promise. They will have the chance to prove that at the World Cup this summer, even with two tough matches to start in Group I when they play in New York against France on June 16 and then Norway six days later.

It will also be an opportunity to put aside the image of farcical petulance when they thought they were being cheated out of the Cup of Nations title. Thiaw had worked himself up over the 48 hours preceding the final as he bemoaned perceived efforts by the hosts to derail their preparations.

Panenka disaster...Brahim Diaz's penalty is saved by Edouard Mendy

There was, to be fair to him, poor security at the train station when the squad arrived in Rabat for the final, although the jostling crowd were almost all their own fans seeking to get close to their heroes. Senegal also objected to the hotel and training facility offered to them in Rabat, which, given their high quality, seemed disingenuous.

> Senegal's success was obviously soured by the histrionics and unseemly walk-off that followed the penalty decision against them

Before the final, key right-back Krepin Diatta, who had played every minute up to the final, was taken ill. "On the morning of the match, I wasn't feeling very well, but I thought it was normal, that it would pass," Diatta has since explained.

"The problem really started when we were leaving for the stadium. I was in pain all over, my head, lots of things. It was very strange. That's when they decided to substitute me.

"I hardly watched any of the final, except for a few short videos, notably Pape Gueye's goal and the missed penalty. I was hospitalised and underwent several tests, but they didn't find anything."

The Senegal players forming a wall around Diatta to protect his privacy while he was stricken during the warm-up, and then carrying him off the field, was one of the tournament's more poignant scenes.

Senegal's conspiracy theory then had added fuel when the match entered its final minutes and Ismailia Sarr netted a rebound for Senegal, but it was ruled out for a foul by Abdoulaye Seck on Achraf Hakimi before heading against the woodwork. The action then moved up to the other end, and Morocco were given their penalty, with Diouf hanging over the shoulders of Brahim Diaz, setting off the dramatic 14-minute walk-off.

It was Mane who cajoled his team-mates back to the field: "His words were powerful," said Pape Gueye, who – after Diaz's inexplicable penalty miss – went on to score the extra-time winner and was another stalwart of their success.

"He found the right words to rally everyone. It shows his importance to the team. We listened to him. Thank you, Sadio."

But for as much as Senegal felt forces were being lined up against them, they should never forget they had a draw that favoured them like no other side, including the hosts, who by the nature of any tournament draw are always handed an advantage.

Senegal were top seeds in Group D and based in the tranquillity of Tangier. By virtue of winning the group, they stayed in the northern city throughout, never having to move from hotel or training base until right before the final.

They were able to progressively improve and emerged in the end as champions. Worthy ones? Probably – but with a bitter aftertaste.

Winning goal...Pape Gueye strikes home the stunning winner

Favourites ease into the knockouts

Sensational start... Morocco's Ayoub El Kaabi scores in the opening game

GROUP A

Burkina Faso were the last host nation to taste defeat in an AFCON tournament's opening match, in 1998, but there was little chance Morocco would follow suit with tiny Comoros their opponents in the first game of the 2025 edition. Nevertheless, the 2-0 victory was a nervy performance, reflecting the enormous pressure on the team.

It took 55 minutes for the deadlock to be broken. Noussair Mazraoui did well to keep the ball from going out of play before passing it square for Brahim Diaz to side-foot home, and substitute striker Ayoub El Kaabi scored a sensational bicycle kick in the 74th minute to ease the tension for the home crowd.

However, a 1-1 draw with Mali in their second game in Rabat elicited a deluge of criticism. It was a poor performance from the hosts that ended their record-breaking run of 19 successive wins and drew a public apology from coach Walid Regragui. Mali were always going to be feisty opponents and both goals, in a tempestuous affair, came from penalties after VAR reviews.

But Mali proved a lot less adept than many thought and finished the group with three draws, unable to beat either Comoros or Zambia. Three points, however, proved enough for second place, while Comoros and Zambia, both on two points, went home after the first round.

GROUP B

Mohamed Salah's outburst at Liverpool just weeks before the tournament kicked off meant that he had even more attention than usual when he took to the field for Egypt's opening game against Zimbabwe. But that furore was soon forgotten when he forced home a dramatic stoppage-time winner as Egypt came from behind to win 2-1 in a match they totally dominated.

The Pharaohs' next fixture against South Africa could not have been more of a contrast. Egypt went ahead from the penalty spot after a VAR review judged that full-back Khuliso Mudau had caught Salah in the face with a trailing hand, and their talisman duly converted the spot-kick. But before the whistle blew for half-time, defender Mohamed Hany was sent off after picking up a second caution. The second half proved one-way traffic as Egypt sat back and absorbed everything that South Africa could throw at them, holding out to emerge as group winners and become the first team through to the next phase, after two games.

That result allowed Egypt coach Hossam Hassan to rest the entire first team for the last game, a goalless draw with Angola, while South Africa made sure of second place by defeating neighbours Zimbabwe 3-2. Oswin Appollis netted an 82nd-minute penalty winner after an inexplicable diving handball from Zimbabwe captain Marvelous Nakamba.

Winless... yet Tanzania still advanced with two draws

Lions v Elephants... Cameroon drew 1-1 with Ivory Coast

GROUP C

Nigeria won all three group games they played in Fez, although not with much conviction. First, they battled past Tanzania 2-1 and then put on a powerful display against Tunisia to go 3-0 up, only to let it slip and eventually have to hold on for victory by the odd goal in five. They were confirmed group winners after that victory and, like other early qualifiers, used the last game to give their fringe players a run out, still proving too strong for Uganda 3-1. Ademola Lookman scored a goal in both of the opening two games, and Raphael Onyedika got a pair against Uganda.

Elias Achouri scored twice as Tunisia started with a 3-1 victory over Uganda and, despite the setback against Nigeria, were guaranteed second spot if they avoided defeat in their last game against Tanzania. That ended in a 1-1 draw after a cracking equaliser from Tanzania's Feisal Salum, handing the Taifa Stars a second point and an unlikely berth in the last 16. It was the first time a team with only two points from their three group fixtures advanced, and it put Tanzania into the knockout stages despite still not winning a game after appearing at four separate finals. They had changed coach just weeks before this edition, with the Argentine Miguel Gamondi coming on board late.

GROUP D

Senegal were top seeds for the group and finished first as expected, but it was on goal difference only from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Both of them beat Benin and Botswana, while the crunch clash between the pair in Tangier ended in a 1-1 draw. Cedric Bakambu gave DRC the lead just after the hour-mark, but it lasted only eight minutes before Sadio Mane equalised.

Mane was still as influential as ever, but it was Bayern Munich striker Nicolas Jackson who got matters underway by scoring twice in the opening 3-0 win over Botswana. There was also a 3-0 triumph over Benin in their last group game, despite playing the last 20 minutes without captain Kalidou Koulibaly, sent off for a clumsy tackle.

DR Congo started with a laboured 1-0 win over Benin but finished strongly against Botswana with a double from 34-year-old Gael Kakuta in their 3-0 victory. The former Chelsea prodigy had been called up just days before the finals as an injury replacement.

Benin advanced as one of the four best third-place finishers by edging Botswana 1-0 with a fortuitous effort from centre-back Yohan Roche that had so much backspin as it deflected off the defender that it looped up over the goalkeeper and into the net. That victory marked Benin's first at the Cup of Nations in their fifth tournament appearance.

GROUP E

Algeria were the second of the two teams to boast a 100% record in the first round, spurned on in their matches by sizeable support. They took only two minutes to score in their opening game with a Riyad Mahrez double seeing them cruise past Sudan 3-0.

It was expected that Burkina Faso would be the other side to advance, but they were 1-0 down to Equatorial Guinea until equalising five minutes into stoppage time and then grabbing a dramatic winner from Edmond Tapsoba in the 98th minute.

Algeria then made sure of top spot by beating Burkina Faso 1-0 in their second game. On the same day, Sudan edged Equatorial Guinea courtesy of a fortuitous own goal, ending any hopes of the latter repeating their giant-killing exploits of the previous Cup of Nations in the Ivory Coast.

The last set of Group E fixtures saw comfortable wins for both Algeria, who were 3-0 up against Equatorial Guinea just past the half-hour mark, eventually winning 3-1, and Burkina Faso, who beat Sudan 2-0. But the war-torn Sudan went through to the knockout stages for only the second time since 1970 as one of the best third-placed finishers.

GROUP F

Holders Ivory Coast only finished above Cameroon on goals scored after a dramatic comeback in their last game against Gabon. Already assured of progress to the next stage, the Ivorians rested regulars and were 2-0 down after 21 minutes. But they fought back to win 3-2 with the equaliser from Evann Guessand coming six minutes from the end and teenager Bazoumana Toure's winner in stoppage time. That was the Ivorians' fifth goal – one more than Cameroon after the Indomitable Lions had come from behind to beat Mozambique 2-1 with a rasping shot from Christian Kofane ensuring victory.

Both Cameroon and the Ivory Coast began their campaigns with low-key 1-0 wins on Christmas Eve as Amad Diallo netted against Mozambique, while Karl Etta Eyong notched early for a winning start for Cameroon's new head coach David Pagou. The heavyweight clash between the Elephants and Indomitable Lions ended 1-1.

Mozambique's dramatic 3-2 win over Gabon was their first success in Cup of Nations history. Gabon's talisman Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang came into the finals carrying a thigh injury and did what he could to help his side but was one of the scapegoats when Gabon's government disbanded the team and kicked him and the coach out.

Mark Gleeson

Dramatic... Mozambique score in the 3-2 victory over Gabon

Tense and nervy knockout stage

Young starlet... Senegal wonderkid Ibrahim Mbaye

LAST 16

No major surprises in the group stage meant that the field for the last 16 included 12 of the top-ranked teams on the continent and a bevy of former champions – and by the end of the eight games, the established order was pretty much in place.

The knockout phase did start with a surprise, though, as Australia-based semi-pro Aamir Abdallah handed Sudan a shock sixth-minute lead over Senegal. It didn't last long, though, as the favourites quickly fought back to go in front by half-time and then complete a 3-1 win with a goal from Ibrahim Mbaye who, at 17 years, 11 months and 11 days, became the second-youngest scorer in tournament history.

Mali were down to ten men after only 26 minutes when defender Woyo Coulibaly was dismissed for a dangerous late tackle, and despite a gallant effort conceded a goal to Tunisia substitute Firas Chaouat in the 88th minute. But the Malians did not give up and forced a stoppage-time spot-kick, which Lassine Sinayoko converted, to take the game into extra-time and then triumphed in a topsy-turvy penalty shootout. Tunisia coach Sami Trabelsi was inevitably fired the next day, some six months before they go to the World Cup.

Morocco were again a bundle of nerves and took more than an hour to score their solitary goal against Tanzania, while Cameroon took advantage of poor defending to beat South Africa 2-1 in back-to-back matches in Rabat.

In the rain in Fez, Nigeria proved far too strong for Mozambique with a 4-0 pasting as Victor Osimhem scored twice but Egypt made heavy work of eliminating Benin, forced into extra-time before eventually winning 3-1 with Mohamed Salah adding some gloss to the scoreline in stoppage time.

The most anticipated clash was Algeria v DR Congo in Rabat and it was tightly contested – albeit with Algeria picking up momentum as the contest wore on and having more of the chances. Just when it seemed penalties would be needed to separate the protagonists, substitute Adil Boulbina cut in off the left flank and fired off a cannon-like shot to win the tie in the last minute.

Defending champions Ivory Coast were the last to go through to the quarter-finals and their impressive 3-0 victory over neighbours Burkina Faso was achieved with Amad Diallo yet again in a starring role.

QUARTER-FINALS

Morocco looked a different team as they took the game to Cameroon in the last eight, playing with more determination and tempo than previously to sweep the Indomitable Lions away. It was an eye opener given some of the tepid showing from the hosts in the earlier rounds and inevitably Brahim Diaz scored for a fifth game in a row, although this time with much fortune as Ayoub El Kaabi's goal-bound header brushed off him and changed direction on its way in. A second goal from Ismael Saibari was fully deserved and the way Morocco furiously celebrated at full-time told of how much they'd been labouring under the pressure of being the home side.

Senegal's progress at the expense of their neighbours Mali was made easier by Yves Bissouma's sending off on the stroke of half-time after two needless cautions, leaving the Malians with little chance of getting back into the contest after Iliman Ndiaye had scored in the 27th minute.

Nigeria and Algeria's clash in Agadir ended in acrimony with players shoving each other, while referee Issa Sy was escorted from the field and protected from angry Algeria staff. Exactly why they felt they were cheated was bemusing given how Nigeria outplayed them and won comfortably with second-half goals from Victor Osimhen and Akor Adams. New goalkeeper Luca Zidane struggled, and his effort to stop Osimhen heading home the opener was one of several misjudgements through the game.

Quarter-final clash...Nigeria v Algeria ended in acrimony

Defending champions Ivory Coast went out to Egypt despite dominating possession and staging a late siege of their opponent's goal. Omar Marmoush's early strike for Egypt quickly galvanised the Ivorians into taking control but they suffered a second sucker-punch when Rami Rabia headed home from a 32nd-minute corner. When the Ivorians pulled one back before the break it seemed

Reacquainted... Sadio Mane won out over his former Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah

likely they would stage another impressive comeback, but that was made all the more difficult after one of the most well-executed goals of the tournament: Rabia dinked the ball over the defensive line to Emam Ashour to run onto and his expert pass was bundled in by Mohamed Salah. Guela Doue did bring it back to 3-2 but few teams are better at stonewalling than Egypt.

SEMI-FINALS

Sadio Mane was quick to admit the only goal of the semi-finals had an element of fortune about it but, when he did get the chance, it was taken with some style. Senegal had been reduced to long-range efforts in Tangier as Egypt's defensive wall held firm against many attacks, with substitute Lamine Camara's 78th-minute speculative effort one of many that was closed down. But the rebound spilt straight to Mane, who unleashed a grass-cutting effort that Mohamed El Shenawy had no chance of stopping.

"I was a bit lucky, you have to admit, because the ball came from nowhere," he said. "It hit my stomach, it was well-positioned, and I instinctively took a first-time shot." A goal worthy of winning any game, and particularly one in which Egypt had adopted a dour defensive strategy, hoping to have Marmoush and Salah work some magic on the counter-attack. Up to the time of conceding the goal, Egypt had not had a shot on target nor forced a corner, but suddenly showed their attacking potential in a furious last ten minutes that came close to delivering an equaliser. But Senegal were deserved of their progress to the final.

So too were Morocco in the game in Rabat that followed, albeit they needed penalties to overcome Nigeria after a goalless two hours of tussle. Morocco's defence found a way to contain Ademola Lookman and Victor Osimhen, leaving Nigeria largely chanceless, while at the other end they had several opportunities, as Neil El Aynaoui put on a masterclass in midfield, but nothing that was clear-cut. It was left to goalkeeper Yassine Bounou to emerge as the hero with two saves in the penalty shootout, the first from Samuel Chukwueze, who had been brought on for the shootout because, according to Nigeria coach Eric Chelle, he was their best penalty taker. His effort was feeble, however, and then followed by Bounou saving with his legs from Bruno Onyemaechi, leaving Youssef En-Nesyri to ensure a 4-2 victory in the shootout. Morocco's second kick was squandered by Hamza Igamane, who collapsed in a heap of distress at the prospect of being the player to precipitate his side's elimination, but his team-mates rescued the Lille striker from a terrible fate.

FINAL

Having the top two-ranked teams decide the final is the perfect scenario to emphasise the standards set through an enthralling month of action, yet the histrionics at the end of the game means that Morocco's showdown with Senegal will forever be clouded in infamy.

Chances at both ends were indicative of a gripping affair, with Ayoub El Kaabi squandering opportunities for the hosts and Senegal also coming close to breaking down Morocco's tight defence. As the game headed goalless to the end of 90 minutes, gaps were beginning to appear, and a dramatic winner looked plausible. But then came controversy.

In the third minute of stoppage time, a Senegal corner was met by Abdoulaye Seck, whose powerful header cannoned back off the post to be converted by Ismaila Sarr. But referee Jean-Jacques Ndala from DR Congo had already blown his whistle for a foul on Achraf Hakimi by Seck, and the goal was disallowed.

Moment later, a corner at the other end saw Senegal full-back El Hadji Malick Diouf tug on the shoulders of Brahim Diaz, who made much of his felling in a bitter complaint to Ndala, who had not blown for a penalty. But after a VAR intervention, the referee was invited to review the incident on the touchline screen and, after looking at the pull on Diaz's shoulder several times, came back on the field and pointed to the penalty spot – and chaos ensued.

Senegal's reaction was to walk off the pitch, egged on by their coach Pape Thiaw. He had been vocal on the eve of the final about the supposedly bad treatment they had been subjected to, encountering a large crowd at the train station when arriving in Rabat from Tangier without adequate security and then rejecting the hotel and training facility they were offered. It was changed, but it left the Senegalese feeling like the odds were being stacked against them.

It was in that context, plus their disallowed goal, that Senegal met the penalty decision with such fury. It took 14 minutes before their players returned to action and Diaz could take the kick, which he inexplicably tried to chip Panenka-style – something that will forever haunt him. Edouard Mendy made the easiest of saves to take the game into extra-time.

Within four minutes of the restart, a surging run was finished off by Pape Gueye's superb strike to hand Senegal the Jaundice Chalice.

Mark Gleeson

Tense finale... players square up at the end of the AFCON final

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

5 Things...

...for the 2026 Brazilian league campaign

1 A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO THE CALENDAR

Some three decades ago, the Brazilian season split into two equal halves. The first few months were given over to the State Championships – one for each of the 27 states that make up this giant country – with the Brasileirao, the national league, squeezed into the last few months. The subsequent story has been of a slow triumph of the national over the regional, with the Brasileirao usually getting underway in early April and going through to December.

But even this patchwork compromise is no longer enough. With a mid-year pause needed for the World Cup, and now for the Club World Cup as well, and next year for the hosting of the Women's World Cup, radical change was needed.

And so, this year the Brasileirao kicked off on January 28, and in the early stages will run midweek while it is played concurrently with reduced State Championships.

This is a significant change. Previously, some clubs essentially approached the first few months as an extended pre-season – Botafogo owner John Textor has been arguing that the year of his club starts in April – but that is no longer possible. League points are now at stake in midweek evenings through high summer.

2 GOOD NEWS FOR NEYMAR

Neymar's comeback to Brazilian football in 2025 was not a success. An inability to shake off a succession of injuries prevented him from building up any rhythm. Santos were in danger of relegation and the explicit aim of the whole thing – to crash his way back into the Brazil squad in time for the World Cup – was looking like a lost cause. There was a glimmer of hope in the last three matches of the season when, admittedly against very poor opposition, Neymar postponed a knee operation and came to life, doing more than anyone else to ensure the club's first division survival.

The focus, then, switches to 2026. In any previous year, it would be tough for the player to stake much of a claim; many of the matches in the Sao Paulo State Championship would hardly serve as a measure to judge his merit for an international recall. But now, as soon as he has recovered, there will be serious league games for him to prove his worth. This promises to be one of the most intense narratives of the first few months of the season.

Comeback kid...can Neymar force his way back into the national team?

3 A NEW THIRD FORCE

In the last ten years, Palmeiras and Flamengo have between them won the title seven times. The split is 4-3 in favour of Palmeiras, but last year they

Title challengers... can Cruzeiro keep up with holders Flamengo?

Hard to replace... Danielzinho has left Mirassol for Sao Paulo

lost out both domestically and in the Copa Libertadores to their rivals from Rio. With vast financial resources and boundless ambition, Flamengo are the team to beat while Palmeiras, having finished second in both of the last two seasons, are under some pressure to win a major title in what might be the last campaign of Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira.

But what of the others? 2017 champions Corinthians have since imploded in debt and though they won the domestic cup in 2025, a bid for the league looks unlikely. Atletico Mineiro (double winners in 2021) and Botafogo (2024 champions) have both slipped back as well, so the new challengers to the big two would seem to be Cruzeiro.

The Belo Horizonte club went through some hard times a decade ago, with a financial meltdown and relegation. The great Ronaldo bought the club and led a low-budget recovery. The current bosses are more willing to spend, although last year's head coach Leonardo Jardim cast the big signings aside and built a highly effective team that finished third. Can they go two places better this time? They certainly look intriguing. Jardim has gone, with former national team coach Tite returning from his period of rest. The club resisted pressure from Flamengo to sell Kaio Jorge, top goalscorer of last year's championship, while international midfielder Gerson joined after a short spell in Russia. With a quick, rugged defence and a squad gaining in depth, Cruzeiro could be challengers.

4 SECOND-SEASON SYNDROME?

A year ago some even questioned the right of little Mirassol to be in the first division. Instead, they were magnificent, playing some high-quality collective football on their way to a shock finish in fourth place.

This season always looked like being harder, chiefly because of the calendar. They have more matches. Qualifying for the Copa Libertadores is an excellent achievement, but one which inevitably puts a strain on the playing resources of such a small club.

And things have got harder still. It would have been fascinating to follow the progress of the 2025 Mirassol side in the Libertadores, but that team no longer exists. There has been an exodus, with key midfielder Danielzinho among the players to have left. Coach Rafael Guanaes has stayed, though. Can he reproduce the splendid work of 2025 with a different line-up?

5 FOREIGN COACHES KEEP ON COMING

The performance of Guanaes last year was a much-needed boost for the local coaching fraternity. So too is the success with Flamengo of Filipe Luis, highlighting the value of Brazilian players with top-class European experience taking up coaching.

Even so, there is no end to the recent trend – with plenty of success stories – of foreign bosses coming in. There are four new ones, three of whom are returning to Brazil after previous spells in the country. Portugal's Luis Castro takes over Gremio, whose Porto Alegre rivals Internacional have appointed Uruguay's Paulo Pezzolano. And, intriguingly, Colombia's Juan Carlos Osorio takes over newly-promoted Remo. The new face is Argentina's Martin Anselmi – and even he had a short spell in Brazil as an assistant five years ago – who is now in charge of Botafogo. The season starts with nine of the 20 Serie A clubs under the command of a non-Brazilian.

Incoming coach... Martin Anselmi left Porto last year

United States

JAMES NALTON

Huge year for MLS

The league's 30-year anniversary coincides with the 2026 World Cup on US soil

It's finally here. North America has been building up to 2026 for some time, and Major League Soccer now gets the chance to showcase its league to a wider audience, hoping to raise its profile on the back of a World Cup on American shores.

MLS has a historic relationship with the World Cup. When FIFA agreed that the 1994 World Cup would be held in the United States, one stipulation was that the US Soccer Federation developed a top-tier professional league in the country.

It seems unimaginable now but, at the time, the United States hadn't had such a league since the NASL folded in 1984. And so, the idea of MLS was born in 1993 and became a reality in its inaugural season in 1996.

Fast forward 30 years, and the 31st season of MLS will take place around the global tournament that led to its creation. The league will break between May 25 and July 16 while the World Cup plays out in the US, Canada and Mexico.

How MLS will capitalise on this, and indeed whether it can, still feels unknown even as we go into the World Cup year.

One thing that will help is that, in 2026, it will be easier to watch the league's action than in recent years. Since 2023, MLS has been behind a standalone paywall called MLS Season Pass – great for existing fans of the league, but off the radar of casual

Big-name signing...German forward Timo Werner has joined San Jose Earthquakes from RB Leipzig

Champions...Inter Miami are aiming to dominate MLS

viewers – but the standalone version of Season Pass has been ditched for 2026. Now, games will be available for anyone who subscribes to Apple TV.

Having Lionel Messi sign a deal through to 2028 also helps. The Argentine will continue to raise the profile of his Inter Miami team around and after the World Cup as they head into 2026 on the back of their first MLS Cup win.

Miami did not, however, top the regular season table in 2025 as they had done in record-breaking fashion in 2024. That accolade, and the Supporters' Shield trophy that goes with it, went to the impressive if unexpected league leaders, Philadelphia Union, who topped the league under the guidance of South African head coach Bradley Carnell.

While the Union have seen key creative force Kai Wagner, former Defender of the Year Jakob Glesnes, and top goalscorer Tai Baribo depart during the off-season, Inter Miami have strengthened further, even when taking into account the retirement last year of Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba.

Sergio Reguilon has arrived from Tottenham Hotspur to replace Alba, while David Ayala comes in from Portland Timbers as Busquets' replacement. The 2025 MLS Goalkeeper of the Year, Dayne St Clair, has also joined from Minnesota United, and will be aiming to secure his place as Canada's No.1 for the World Cup.

With those intra-league moves, Miami have weakened two other MLS teams while strengthening themselves. They have also secured key players Tadeo Allende and Rodrigo de Paul to permanent deals, while Argentine-born Mexican international German Berterame joins veteran Luis Suarez in the forward ranks after completing a $15 million move from Monterrey.

As they move into a new stadium in Miami for 2026 – they previously played home games in Fort Lauderdale – the champions may well be on the way to building an MLS version of Paris Saint-Germain or Bayern Munich, in spite of the league's roster rules and salary cap aimed at enforcing some kind of parity.

> Inter Miami may well be on the way to building an MLS version of Paris Saint-Germain or Bayern Munich

Outside of Miami, one of the biggest intra-league signings was Nashville's acquisition of Cristian Espinoza from San Jose Earthquakes. It's a savvy free transfer for the Tennessee team, but Earthquakes fans might be appeased by the arrival of a big-name signing, Timo Werner from RB Leipzig.

Speaking of big names, Los Angeles FC's Son Heung-min was in MVP-level form during his stint towards the end of last year, having joined midway through the season. Now, with a full season of games ahead of him, the South Korean may well rival Messi as the best player in the league in 2026.

In Canada, Toronto FC and Vancouver Whitecaps will attempt to capitalise on their respective stadiums hosting World Cup games, while Montreal fans will be hoping their team can arrest a malaise that has hung over the team for some time. Many of Canada's key players play in MLS, including Richie Laryea and Jonathan Osorio at Toronto, Jacob Shaffelburg of LAFC, and St Clair's competition between the posts, Maxime Crepeau at Orlando City. They'll all have something to prove for club as well as country this year.

For the United States, notable MLS-based national team players include the New York City goalkeeper Matt Freese, who has emerged as Mauricio Pochettino's No.1, Charlotte FC centre-back Tim Ream and 21-year-old Real Salt Lake attacking midfielder Diego Luna. However, 21-year-old right-back Alex Freeman, who is also pushing for a place with the national team, has exited the league, leaving Orlando City for Villarreal in Spain.

The story of the current top tier of American soccer is not possible without the World Cup and, in 2026, the league and the tournament that helped create it will define a momentous year for the sport in the US and Canada.

MVP contender... Son Heung-min ended the 2025 season on fire

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

5 Things...

...for the 2026 J. League season

1 SHIFTING TO A EUROPEAN CALENDAR

The J. League kicks off twice in 2026, first with an interim tournament – the 100 Year Vision League – in February and then again in August with the start of the 2026-27 season, which runs through until May 2027.

The J. League's predecessor, the Japan Soccer League, attempted a similar shift from the calendar-year format to a European season in 1986-87, but that was reversed with the advent of the J. League in 1993. The issues then remain the same today: many parts of Japan experience heavy snowfall in winter, which impacts not only matches but also training and transport. The cold weather could also keep some supporters away. On the other hand, the calendar year requires playing through the extreme heat and humidity of the Japanese summer.

That heat problem is partially solved by the new kick-off date at the height of summer in the second week of August. The snow issue has been addressed by the introduction of a winter break.

Wonderkid to watch... Ryunosuke Sato made his Japan debut last summer

2 THE INTERIM J1 100 YEAR VISION LEAGUE

In the meantime, the J. League has already kicked off its interim tournament, the Meiji Yasuda 100 Year Vision League.

The 20 first-division clubs have been assigned to two leagues, east and west, where they will play each other twice, home and away. The final rankings will then be decided over two legs by ten east-west play-offs – the top eastern team against the top western team, second against second, third against third and so on down the table. The 40 second and third-division clubs have been combined and divided into four regional leagues for their tournament.

There is also a partial throwback to the early J. League with the reintroduction of penalty shootouts for drawn matches, with three points awarded for a win in 90 minutes, two for a win on penalties and one for the team that loses on penalties.

Prize money will be awarded, but there is no promotion or relegation in the interim league. There is an extra incentive for the winners, who will qualify alongside the 2025 champions and runners-up, Kashima Antlers and Kashiwa Reysol, for the 2026-27 Asian Champions League Elite. If either Antlers or Reysol win the interim tournament, that place will go to Kyoto Sanga, third in the league in 2025. Machida Zelvia will play in the Asian Champions League Two as Emperor's Cup winners.

Back on top... Kashima Antlers won a dramatic title race in 2025

Emperor's Cup winners... Machida Zelvia

The 2026 Emperor's Cup also kicks off in August and the date of the final at the National Stadium in Tokyo returns to New Year's Day (2027) for the first time in six years.

3 RENEWED FOCUS ON YOUTH

Young players are very much in the spotlight these days in the J. League, with the clubs' academy systems producing so many talented players who, in turn, are being increasingly snapped up by European clubs.

Maki Kitahara of FC Tokyo set the new record as the J. League's youngest player when he came on at the age of 15 years, seven months and 22 days against Antlers in March last year. Elsewhere, the likes of Kota Takai (Borussia Monchengladbach, on loan from Tottenham Hotspur), Sota Kitano (Red Bull Salzburg) and Junnosuke Suzuki (Copenhagen) all secured moves to Europe in 2025 and made their international debuts within the past 18 months, while 19-year-old winger Ryunosuke Sato, named the J. League's Best Young Player of 2025, is tipped to follow them.

The big innovation for the 2026-27 season is the launch of the new "post-youth" Under-21 J. League to give young players more 90-minute match experience in the difficult period between finishing high school at 18 and becoming first-team regulars. Eleven clubs have signed up and this league, too, will be played in eastern and western divisions.

4 KASHIMA ANTLERS BACK ON TOP

In the middle of all this change, the J. League's most salient feature is the return of its most-crowned club, Kashima Antlers, to the top of the table. The 2025 league title was their ninth overall but first since 2016. It was also their first trophy of any description since lifting the Asian Champions League crown in 2018. Manager Toru Oniki is now looking to repeat his achievement of back-to-back titles in his first two years as a manager at Kawasaki Frontale in 2017-18.

The competition will be fierce with Kashiwa Reysol also resurgent last year, as well as fine performances by Kyoto Sanga, Machida Zelvia and Sanfrecce Hiroshima, now under new manager Bartosch Gaul from the RB Leipzig academy. Dethroned Vissel Kobe, champions in 2023 and 2024, are eager for revenge under their new coach, Michael Skibbe, the man who led Sanfrecce for the past four years. With Kawasaki Frontale and Yokohama F-Marinos also itching to return to the fray, the race for honours is wide open.

5 EVER-GROWING CROWDS

The J. League has never been more popular. The 2025 season set a new all-time aggregate record of 13,503,210 fans in the stadiums (just over eight million for the first division alone), an increase of almost a million from 2024.

And the growth in spectators is not limited to the top flight. Looking down the age groups, an astonishing crowd of 61,420 watched Kamimura Gakuen of Ichikikushiki City defeat Kashima Gakuen 3-0 in the high school final at the National Stadium on January 12.

Record crowds...Urawa Red Diamonds had the highest average attendance in last season's J. League

Austria

STEVE MENARY

Amateur Nations Cup...action from Austria's 3-1 win over Bosnia & Herzegovina

International amateur football returns to Europe

A new tournament aims to provide a platform and a competition for the continent's best amateur players

UEFA's Amateur Cup was a short-lived tournament that briefly prolonged the out-dated notion of amateur status before ending in 1978. Now, nearly half a century later, an Austrian former match agent has revived the concept.

Armin Somrak arranged more than 1,000 friendly games for clubs and national teams, often in his native Austria or bordering countries, and was inspired by the quality of players he found in teams providing warm-up opposition.

"Sometimes clubs would want low-level teams for sparring partners and sometimes these teams beat the pro clubs or gave them a tight game," say Somrak, who is now 60 and recalls the old Amateur Cup. "So, I got in mind we can bring the best amateur players together from Central Europe.

"When we called up the best amateur players in Austria and Slovenia, they thought it was a joke."

Two and a half years in the making, Somrak arranged the first Amateur Nations Cup in October last year at Neunkirchen, Ternitz and Traiskirchen in Austria. It featured four teams: the hosts, Slovenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Greenland.

> "When we called up the best amateur players in Austria and Slovenia, they thought it was a joke"
> Amateur Nations Cup organiser Armin Somrak

Austria beat Bosnia & Herzegovina 3-1 in the decisive match to secure the 2025 Amateur Nations Cup title, with Ben Leitenstorfer – who plays his club football for Austrian third-tier side SV Seekirchen – named Player of the Tournament after scoring three goals.

Hosts...Austria's national amateur team line up

More importantly for Somrak, 15 of the players from a single weekend of just six matches have now signed professional contracts.

Somrak's Amateur National Teams Football Association (ANTFA) has now identified four windows during 2026 for matches, starting with two days of games in February featuring Austria, Slovenia and Ukraine.

Austria and Slovenia will then host a week-long programme of up to a dozen games in June. Other federations are interested, such as Bulgaria and Serbia, spurred on by Somrak's zeal and the location, which cuts down on travel costs.

Somrak explains: "In places like Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina there are many amateur players in their semi-pro leagues; 65% of the players are amateur and they are of high quality.

"The problem is that everyone wants to have it but not everyone wants to pay. Federations don't have the money to pay for an amateur national team. That's why we've started in Central Europe so there is not too much travel."

To aid grassroots representative football, UEFA created and funded the Regions' Cup for amateur teams, which started in 1999 and is played biennially, but Somrak says his idea is different: "Not everyone wants to play in the Regions' Cup because of the regulations," he says. "Those players cannot be a national selection, they are a regional selection. That is the point."

The ANTFA has two more weekend windows in October and November and hopes to complete eight games in each.

Morten Rutkjaer, the Danish coach of Greenland, which has been unable to secure affiliation to any regional confederation, says: "It is a great set-up and a good competition to participate in for Greenland – high level of players and matches. I hope we will participate again in October."

By then, Somrak hopes his plan will have snowballed. "My goal is to collect eight to 12 nations, and we will go officially to UEFA and ask all the members if they want the format like we had before," says Somrak, whose enthusiasm made his dream a reality that is proving attractive.

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

History-makers... Leandro Andrade and Matheus Silva celebrate Qarabag reaching the UEFA Champions League knockout rounds

QARABAG'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HEROICS

Bankrolled by food production conglomerate Azersun Holdings, Qarabag have been the dominant force in Azerbaijan for more than a decade, winning 11 out of the last 12 league titles. But they have struggled to carry that success over to the European stage, and before this season had not won a single game in the Champions League proper. This season, however, they have already won three games – beating Benfica, Copenhagen and Eintracht Frankfurt – to become the first side from their country to qualify for the knockout stages of Europe's premier club competition.

It is a historic achievement for a club that has spent more than three decades playing in exile in Azerbaijan's capital Baku after fleeing from their hometown of Agdam following the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. But with Azerbaijan having since retaken that land from neighbouring Armenia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, there are now plans for Qarabag to return to Agdam in the near future.

Work is already underway on the reconstruction of the Imarat Stadium, which was seriously damaged by the conflict. It will not be finished in time to host any European games this season, but some of the biggest clubs on the continent could be coming to Agdam very soon.

THE WORLD'S LONGEST CUP DRAW

If you thought the 2026 FIFA World Cup draw was excessively drawn-out, wait until you hear about the broadcast for the Suomen Cup, the main national cup competition in Finland.

Conducted live at the end of January, the draw involved 417 clubs from across the country and took more than four hours to reach its conclusion. The Finnish FA appeared to revel in the absurdity, even publishing a meme on their official Instagram account that read: Lord of the Rings (2h58m), Titanic (3h14m) and Finnish Cup draw (4h10m).

But that is by no means the competition's only quirk. It started in early February with Round 0 – the preliminary stage that precedes the first round – and is packed full of teams with standout names, from SexyPoxyt (Sexy Pants) in the south to FC Santa Claus in the north.

It then concludes in September with the final and the award of a trophy with a unique claim to fame. Speaking to *The Sweeper*, tournament director Tomi Leivo-Jokimaki explained that it is identical to the trophy awarded at Crufts, the famous dog show held annually in Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

ATERT BISSEN'S REMARKABLE RISE

When Luxembourgish minnows Atert Bissen approached Carlos Teixeira to be their president in 2023, they knew he was a man who could build a football club – because he had quite literally built theirs with his own construction company.

Teixeira had already rejected the head coach role and never intended to accept the presidency either, but he ultimately agreed to the proposal put forward by local mayor David Viaggi. "We met in a restaurant. It was my biggest mistake to agree to that meeting. After one or two bottles of wine, the world looked very different," Teixeira told the *Tageblatt* newspaper.

Bissen's rise since then has been remarkable. The club achieved back-to-back promotions from the third tier to Luxembourg's National Division – at which point, Teixeira removed his own brother Pedro as head coach and brought in Portuguese tactician Vitor Pereira (not the former Wolverhampton Wanderers coach).

What seemed a bold move has since been validated. While Bissen were widely predicted to stay up, they were not expected to be challenging leaders Differdange 03 for the title. If they do win the league championship this season, they will be the first European club to go from the third tier to national champions in the space of three seasons since Ludogorets in Bulgaria (2010-2012).

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

South Melbourne v Auckland FC
OFC Pro League, February 21
The OFC Pro League (covered in last month's *World Soccer*) is set for a top-of-the-table clash when South Melbourne host Auckland FC in the third circuit series. The two teams have been the early pace-setters in the competition and have both won all their games at the time of writing.

Ludogorets v Levski Sofia
Bulgarian Parva Liga, March 4
If Ludogorets are to win a European record 15th consecutive league title, they must beat Levski Sofia at home and close the gap on the leaders. It will be the third clash between the teams in a matter of weeks, after meetings in the Bulgarian Super Cup and the Bulgarian Cup.

Spaeri v Dinamo Tbilisi
Georgian Erovnuli Liga, March 7
Only founded in 2017 by members of Georgia's Special State Protection Service, the government agency responsible for protecting high-ranking officials, Spaeri have since risen from the fifth tier to the top division and won the cup along the way (in 2024). This will be their first-ever top-flight home game.

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2025 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

ALGERIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Anthony **MANDREA**	(28) 25.12.96	Caen (Fra)
16	Oussama **BENBOT**	(31) 11.10.94	USM Alger
23	Luca **ZIDANE**	(27) 13.05.98	Granada (Spa)

DEFENDERS

2	Aissa **MANDI**	(34) 22.10.91	Lille (Fra)
3	Mehdi **DORVAL**	(24) 09.02.01	Bari (Ita)
4	Mohamed Amine **TOUGAI**	(25) 22.01.00	Esperance (Tun)
5	Zineddine **BELAID**	(26) 20.03.99	JS Kabylie
13	Jaouen **HADJAM**	(22) 26.03.03	Young Boys (Sui)
15	Rayan **AIT-NOURI**	(24) 06.06.01	Man. City (Eng)
20	Youcef **ATAL**	(29) 17.05.96	Al Sadd (Qat)
21	Ramy **BENSEBAINI**	(30) 16.04.95	Borussia Dortmund (Ger)
25	Rafik **BELGHALI**	(23) 07.06.02	Hellas Verona (Ita)
26	Samir **CHERGUI**	(26) 06.02.99	Paris FC (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Ramiz **ZERROUKI**	(27) 26.05.98	Twente (Ned)
8	Himad **ABDELLI**	(26) 17.11.99	Angers (Fra)
10	Ismael **BENNACER**	(28) 01.12.97	Dinamo Zagreb (Cro)
14	Hicham **BOUDAOUI**	(26) 23.09.99	Nice (Fra)
17	Fares **CHAIBI**	(23) 28.11.02	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
19	Adem **ZORGANE**	(25) 06.01.00	Union SG (Bel)
22	Ibrahim **MAZA**	(20) 24.11.05	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
24	Ilan **KEBBAL**	(27) 10.07.98	Paris FC (Fra)
27	Adil **BOULBINA**	(22) 02.05.03	Al Duhail (Qat)

FORWARDS

7	Riyad **MAHREZ**	(34) 21.02.91	Al Ahli (KSA)
9	Baghdad **BOUNEDJAH**	(34) 24.11.91	Al Shamal (Qat)
11	Anis Hadj **MOUSSA**	(23) 11.02.02	Feyenoord (Ned)
12	Monsef **BAKRAR**	(24) 13.01.01	Dinamo Zagreb (Cro)
18	Mohamed **AMOURA**	(25) 09.05.00	Wolfsburg (Ger)
28	Redouane **BERKANE**	(22) 07.07.03	Al Wakrah (Qat)

COACH

Vladimir **PETKOVIC** (Bih) (62) 15.08.63

ANGOLA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Hugo **MARQUES**	(39) 15.01.86	Petro de Luanda
12	Antonio **DOMINIQUE**	(31) 25.07.94	Etoile Carouge (Sui)
22	**NEBLU**	(32) 16.12.93	1° de Agosto
26	Agostinho **CALUNGA**	(27) 10.07.98	Wiliete

DEFENDERS

2	Nurio **FORTUNA**	(30) 24.03.95	Volos (Gre)
3	Jonathan **BUATU**	(32) 27.09.93	Gil Vicente (Por)
4	Clinton **MATA**	(33) 07.11.92	Lyon (Fra)
5	David **CARMO**	(26) 19.07.99	Real Oviedo (Spa)
6	Kialonda **GASPAR**	(28) 27.09.97	Lecce (Ita)
13	To **CARNEIRO**	(30) 05.11.95	AS FAR (Mar)
21	Eddie **AFONSO**	(31) 07.03.94	Petro de Luanda
25	Rui **MODESTO**	(26) 07.10.99	Udinese (Ita)
28	Pedro **BONDO**	(21) 16.11.04	Famalicao (Por)

MIDFIELDERS

8	**MAESTRO**	(22) 04.08.03	Alanyaspor (Tur)
15	Beni **MUKENDI**	(23) 21.05.02	Vitoria Guimaraes (Por)
16	**FREDY**	(35) 27.03.90	Bodrum (Tur)
17	Randy **NTEKA**	(28) 06.12.97	Rayo Vallecano (Spa)
20	Manuel **KELIANO**	(22) 06.01.03	Akhmat Grozny (Rus)
23	**SHOW**	(26) 06.03.99	Kocaelispor (Tur)
24	Mario **BALBURDIA**	(28) 19.08.97	Boluspor (Tur)

FORWARDS

7	Felicio **MILSON**	(26) 12.10.99	Red Star Belgrade (Srb)
9	M'Bala **NZOLA**	(29) 18.08.96	Pisa (Ita)
10	Gelson **DALA**	(29) 13.07.96	Al Wakrah (Qat)
11	Ary **PAPEL**	(31) 03.03.94	Al Akhdar (Lby)
14	Manuel **BENSON**	(28) 28.03.97	Swansea City (Wal)
18	Zito **LUVUMBO**	(23) 09.03.02	Cagliari (Ita)
19	**MABULULU**	(33) 01.06.92	Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
27	Chico **BANZA**	(27) 17.12.98	Zamalek (Egy)

COACH

Patrice **BEAUMELLE** (Fra) (47) 24.04.78

BENIN

GOALKEEPERS

1	Marcel **DANDJINOU**	(27) 25.06.98	Kruger United (RSA)
16	Saturnin **ALLAGBE**	(32) 22.11.93	Chauray (Fra)
23	Serge **OBASSA**	(29) 30.06.96	Remo Stars (Nga)

DEFENDERS

3	Tamimou **OUOROU**	(22) 03.05.03	Sobemap
5	Yohan **ROCHE**	(28) 07.07.97	Petrolul Ploiesti (Rou)
6	Olivier **VERDON**	(30) 05.10.95	Ludogorets (Bul)
11	Rachid **MOUMINI**	(21) 27.10.04	Sumgayit (Aze)
12	David **KIKI**	(32) 25.11.93	FCSB (Rou)
13	Mohamed **TIJANI**	(28) 10.07.97	Yverdon-Sport (Sui)
26	Charlemagne **AZONGNITODE**	(24) 08.08.01	Oulu (Fin)

MIDFIELDERS

2	Rodrigue **FASSINOU**	(26) 22.05.99	Coton
4	Attidjikou **SAMADOU**	(21) 02.02.04	Smouha (Egy)
7	Matteo **AHLINVI**	(26) 02.07.99	Arsenal Tula (Rus)
8	Hassane **IMOURANE**	(22) 08.04.03	Grasshopper (Sui)
14	Mariano **AHOUANGBO**	(23) 16.11.02	Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn)
15	Sessi **D'ALMEIDA**	(30) 20.11.95	Neftci (Aze)
17	Rodolfo **ALOKO**	(18) 26.12.06	Kustosija (Cro)
18	Junior **OLAITAN**	(23) 09.05.02	Goztepe (Tur)
19	Dodo **DOKOU**	(21) 04.05.04	Leixoes (Por)
20	Jodel **DOSSOU**	(33) 17.03.92	Pays du Valois (Fra)
21	Rodrigue **KOSSI**	(25) 31.12.99	Hassania Agadir (Mar)
22	Romaric **AMOUSSOU**	(25) 10.12.00	ASEC Mimosas (Civ)
24	Razack **RACHIDOU**	(19) 22.06.06	Kustosija (Cro)
25	Olatoundji **TESSILIMI**	(27) 18.02.98	SJK (Fin)
27	Gislain **AHOUDO**	(26) 02.07.99	AS Gabes (Tun)

FORWARDS

9	Steve **MOUNIE**	(31) 29.09.94	Alanyaspor (Tur)
10	Aiyegun **TOSIN**	(27) 26.06.98	Lorient (Fra)
28	Adam **AKIMEY**	(21) 25.02.04	Helsingborg (Swe)

COACH

Gernot **ROHR** (Ger) (72) 28.06.53

Algeria icon...Riyad Mahrez scores a penalty v Burkina Faso

Gelson Dala...the Angola forward celebrates v Zimbabwe

Indomitable Lions...Cameroon reached the quarter-finals

BOTSWANA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Kabelo **DAMBE**	(35) 10.05.90	Township Rollers
16	Keagile **KGOSIPULA**	(29) 02.01.96	Mochudi Centre Chiefs
23	Goitseone **PHOKO**	(31) 13.12.94	Jwaneng Galaxy

DEFENDERS

2	Thabo **LEINANYANE**	(32) 27.07.93	Jwaneng Galaxy
3	Thatayaone **DITLHOKWE**	(27) 21.09.98	Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby)
4	Mosha **GAOLAOLWE**	(31) 25.12.93	Township Rollers
5	Alford **VELAPHI**	(26) 18.01.99	Gaborone United
12	Mothusi **JOHNSON**	(28) 28.07.97	Gaborone United
19	Chicco **MOLEFE**	(30) 29.07.95	Jwaneng Galaxy
20	Tebogo **KOPELANG**	(23) 24.04.02	Jwaneng Galaxy
26	Shanganani **NGADA**	(31) 16.03.94	Mochudi Centre Chiefs

MIDFIELDERS

6	Gape **MOHUTSIWA**	(28) 20.03.97	MC Oran (Alg)
8	Olebogeng **RAMOTSE**	(27) 17.01.98	Jwaneng Galaxy
13	Segolame **BOY**	(33) 07.11.92	Sua Flamingoes
14	Godarione **MODINGWANE**	(29) 25.06.96	Botswana Defence Force
15	Mothusi **COOPER**	(28) 19.07.97	Township Rollers
18	Lebogang **DITSELE**	(29) 20.04.96	Gaborone United
22	Gilbert **BARUTI**	(33) 16.03.92	Mochudi Centre Chiefs
25	Monty **ENOSA**	(21) 06.02.04	Mochudi Centre Chiefs

FORWARDS

7	Kabelo **SEAKANYENG**	(32) 25.06.93	Maghreb Fez (Mar)
9	Omaatla **KEBATHO**	(32) 16.06.93	Jwaneng Galaxy
10	Thabang **SESINYI**	(33) 15.10.92	Jwaneng Galaxy
11	Tumisang **OREBONYE**	(29) 26.03.96	Wydad AC (Mar)
17	Thatayaone **KGAMANYANE**	(29) 30.01.96	Gaborone United
21	Thabo **MAPONDA**	(28) 17.07.97	Gaborone United
24	Losika **RATSHKUDU**	(19) 01.02.06	Ubuntu (RSA)

COACH

Morena **RAMOREBOLI** (RSA) (44) 01.01.81

BURKINA FASO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Farid **OUEDRAOGO**	(28) 26.12.96	Al Hilal (Sdn)
16	Herve **KOFFI**	(29) 16.10.96	Angers (Fra)
23	Kilian **NIKIEMA**	(22) 22.06.03	ADO Den Haag (Ned)

DEFENDERS

3	Abdoul **AYINDE**	(20) 17.07.05	Gent (Bel)
4	Adamo **NAGALO**	(23) 22.09.02	PSV (Ned)
5	Nasser **DJIGA**	(23) 15.11.02	Rangers (Sco)
9	Issa **KABORE**	(24) 12.05.01	Wrexham (Wal)
12	Edmond **TAPSOBA**	(26) 02.02.99	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
14	Issoufou **DAYO**	(34) 06.08.91	Umm Salal (Qat)
25	Steeve **YAGO**	(33) 16.12.92	Aris Limassol (Cyp)
26	Arsene **KOUASSI**	(21) 11.09.04	Lorient (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Mohamed **ZOUGRANA**	(24) 29.10.01	MC Alger (Alg)
8	Cedric **BADOLO**	(27) 04.11.98	Spartak Trnava (Svk)
15	Abdoul **YODA**	(25) 20.12.00	Milsami Orhei (Mda)
17	Stephane **AZIZ KI**	(29) 06.03.96	Wydad AC (Mar)
18	Ismahila **OUEDRAOGO**	(26) 05.11.99	OB (Den)
20	Gustavo **SANGARE**	(29) 08.11.96	Noah (Arm)
22	Blati **TOURE**	(31) 04.08.94	Pyramids (Egy)
24	Saidou **SIMPORE**	(33) 31.08.92	National Bank of Egypt (Egy)
28	Josue **TIENDREBEOGO**	(23) 21.11.02	Annecy (Fra)

FORWARDS

2	Lassina **TRAORE**	(24) 12.01.01	Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr)
7	Dango **OUATTARA**	(23) 11.02.02	Brentford (Eng)
10	Bertrand **TRAORE**	(30) 06.09.95	Sunderland (Eng)
11	Ousseni **BOUDA**	(25) 28.04.00	San Jose Earthquakes (USA)
13	Mohamed **KONATE**	(28) 12.12.97	Akhmat Grozny (Rus)
19	Georgi **MINOUNGOU**	(23) 25.07.02	Seattle Sounders (USA)
21	Cyriaque **IRIE**	(20) 20.06.05	Freiburg (Ger)
27	Pierre Landry **KABORE**	(24) 05.07.01	Hearts (Sco)

COACH

Brama **TRAORE** (63) 22.03.62

CAMEROON

GOALKEEPERS

1	Simon **OMOSSOLA**	(27) 05.05.98	Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod)
16	Devis **EPASSY**	(32) 02.02.93	Dinamo Bucuresti (Rou)
23	Simon **NGAPANDOUETNBU**	(22) 12.04.03	Montpellier (Fra)
28	Edouard **SOMBANG**	(27) 29.05.98	Colombe Sportive

DEFENDERS

2	Junior **TCHAMADEU**	(21) 22.12.03	Stoke City (Eng)
3	Che **MALONE**	(26) 23.05.99	USM Alger (Alg)
4	Christopher **WOOH**	(24) 18.09.01	Spartak Moscow (Rus)
5	Nouhou **TOLO**	(28) 23.06.97	Seattle Sounders (USA)
6	Gerzino **NYAMSI**	(28) 22.01.97	Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus)
13	Darlin **YONGWA**	(25) 21.09.00	Lorient (Fra)
17	Samuel **KOTTO**	(22) 03.09.03	Gent (Bel)
18	Aboubakar **NAGIDA**	(20) 28.06.05	Rennes (Fra)
22	Flavien Enzo **BOYOMO**	(24) 07.10.01	Osasuna (Spa)

MIDFIELDERS

8	Jean **ONANA**	(25) 08.01.00	Genoa (Ita)
15	Arthur **AVOM**	(21) 15.12.04	Lorient (Fra)
19	Martin **NDZIE**	(22) 16.01.03	Rapid Vienna (Aut)
20	Olivier **KEMEN**	(29) 20.07.96	Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur)
24	Carlos **BALEBA**	(21) 03.01.04	Brighton (Eng)
25	Eric Junior **DINA EBIMBE**	(25) 21.11.00	Brest (Fra)
27	Arnold Mael **KAMDEM**	(25) 18.01.00	Sport Sinop (Bra)

FORWARDS

7	Georges-Kevin **NKOUDOU**	(30) 14.02.95	Diriyah (KSA)
9	Frank **MAGRI**	(26) 04.09.99	Toulouse (Fra)
10	Bryan **MBEUMO**	(26) 07.08.99	Man. United (Eng)
11	Christian **BASSOGOG**	(30) 18.10.95	Al Okhdood (KSA)
12	Patrick **SOKO**	(28) 31.10.97	Almeria (Spa)
14	Danny **NAMASO**	(25) 28.08.00	Auxerre (Fra)
21	Karl **ETTA EYONG**	(22) 14.10.03	Levante (Spa)
26	Christian **KOFANE**	(19) 27.07.06	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)

COACH

David **PAGOU** (56) 13.01.69

COMOROS

GOALKEEPERS

1	Salim Ben **BOINA**	(34) 19.07.91	Istres (Fra)
16	Yannick **PANDOR**	(24) 01.05.01	Francs Borains (Bel)
23	Adel **ANZIMATI**	(24) 05.11.01	Ararat Yerevan (Arm)

DEFENDERS

2	Ismael **BOURA**	(25) 14.08.00	Troyes (Fra)
3	Abdel-Hakim **ABDALLAH**	(28) 18.08.97	Guingamp (Fra)
4	Kenan **TOIBIBOU**	(21) 09.12.04	Bravo (Svn)
5	Ahmed **SOILIHI**	(29) 01.07.96	Toulon (Fra)
8	Yannis **KARI**	(25) 02.11.00	Frejus Saint-Raphael (Fra)
12	Kassim **M'DAHOMA**	(28) 26.01.97	Aubagne (Fra)
22	Said **BAKARI**	(31) 22.09.94	Sparta Rotterdam (Ned)
25	Idris **MOHAMED**	(22) 25.11.03	Le Puy (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Iyad **MOHAMED**	(24) 05.03.01	Casa Pia (Por)
10	Youssouf **M'CHANGAMA**	(35) 29.08.90	Al Batin (KSA)
14	Remy **VITA**	(24) 01.04.01	Tondela (Por)
15	Benjaloud **YOUSSOUF**	(31) 11.02.94	Sochaux (Fra)
18	Yacine **BOURHANE**	(27) 30.09.98	Aris Limassol (Cyp)
26	Raouf **MROIVILI**	(26) 14.01.99	Villefranche (Fra)
27	Rayan **LUTIN**	(22) 16.01.03	Amiens (Fra)
28	Zaydou **YOUSSOUF**	(26) 11.07.99	Al Fateh (KSA)

FORWARDS

7	Faiz **SELEMANI**	(32) 14.11.93	Qatar SC (Qat)
9	Aboubacar **ALI**	(19) 02.04.06	Francs Borains (Bel)
11	Rafiki **SAID**	(25) 15.03.00	Standard Liege (Bel)
13	Aymeric **AHMED**	(22) 08.11.03	Strasbourg (Fra)
17	Myziane **MAOLIDA**	(26) 14.02.99	Al Kholood (KSA)
20	Zaid **AMIR**	(23) 11.05.02	Istres (Fra)
21	El Fardou **BEN NABOUHANE**	(36) 10.06.89	Zemun (Srb)

COACH

	Stefano **CUSIN** (Can/Ita)	(57) 28.10.68	

DR CONGO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Lionel **MPASI**	(31) 01.08.94	Le Havre (Fra)
16	Timothy **FAYULU**	(26) 24.07.99	Noah (Arm)
21	Matthieu **EPOLO**	(20) 15.01.05	Standard Liege (Bel)
28	Dimitry **BERTAUD**	(27) 06.06.98	(Unattached)

DEFENDERS

2	Aaron **WAN-BISSAKA**	(28) 26.11.97	West Ham United (Eng)
3	Steve **KAPUADI**	(27) 30.04.98	Legia Warsaw (Pol)
4	Axel **TUANZEBE**	(28) 14.11.97	Burnley (Eng)
5	Dylan **BATUBINSIKA**	(29) 15.02.96	Saint-Etienne (Fra)
12	Joris **KAYEMBE**	(31) 08.08.94	Genk (Bel)
15	Rocky **BUSHIRI**	(26) 30.11.99	Hibernian (Sco)
22	Chancel **MBEMBA**	(31) 08.08.94	Lille (Fra)
24	Gedeon **KALULU**	(28) 29.08.97	Aris Limassol (Cyp)
26	Arthur **MASUAKU**	(32) 07.11.93	Sunderland (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Ngal'ayel **MUKAU**	(21) 03.11.04	Lille (Fra)
8	Samuel **MOUTOUSSAMY**	(29) 12.08.96	Atromitos (Gre)
11	Gael **KAKUTA**	(34) 21.06.91	Sakaryaspor (Tur)
14	Noah **SADIKI**	(21) 17.12.04	Sunderland (Eng)
18	Charles **PICKEL**	(28) 15.05.97	Espanyol (Spa)
25	Edo **KAYEMBE**	(27) 03.06.98	Watford (Eng)

FORWARDS

7	Nathanael **MBUKU**	(23) 16.03.02	Montpellier (Fra)
9	Samuel **ESSENDE**	(27) 30.01.98	Augsburg (Ger)
10	Theo **BONGONDA**	(30) 20.11.95	Spartak Moscow (Rus)
13	Meschak **ELIA**	(28) 06.08.97	Alanyaspor (Tur)
17	Cedric **BAKAMBU**	(34) 11.04.91	Real Betis (Spa)
19	Fiston **MAYELE**	(31) 24.06.94	Pyramids (Egy)
20	Brian **CIPENGA**	(27) 11.03.98	Castellon (Spa)
23	Simon **BANZA**	(29) 13.08.96	Al Jazira (UAE)
27	Michel-Ange **BALIKWISHA**	(24) 10.05.01	Celtic (Sco)

COACH

	Sebastien **DESABRE** (Fra)	(49) 02.08.76	

EGYPT

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ahmed **EL SHENAWY**	(34) 14.05.91	Pyramids
16	Mohamed **SOBHY**	(26) 15.07.99	Zamalek
23	Mohamed **EL SHENAWY**	(37) 18.12.88	Al Ahly
26	Mostafa **SHOBEIR**	(25) 17.03.00	Al Ahly

DEFENDERS

2	Khaled **SOBHI**	(30) 04.05.95	Al Masry
3	Mohamed **HANY**	(29) 25.01.96	Al Ahly
4	Hossam **ABDELMAGUID**	(24) 30.04.01	Zamalek
5	Ramy **RABIA**	(32) 20.05.93	Al Ain (UAE)
6	Yasser **IBRAHIM**	(32) 10.02.93	Al Ahly
12	Mohamed **HAMDY**	(30) 15.03.95	Pyramids
13	Ahmed Abou **EL FOTOUH**	(27) 22.03.98	Zamalek
24	Ahmed **EID**	(24) 02.01.01	Al Masry
28	Mohamed **ISMAIL**	(26) 01.08.99	Zamalek

MIDFIELDERS

8	Emam **ASHOUR**	(27) 20.02.98	Al Ahly
14	Hamdy **FATHY**	(31) 29.09.94	Al Wakrah (Qat)
15	Mohamed **SHEHATA**	(24) 08.02.01	Zamalek
17	Mohanad **LASHEEN**	(29) 29.05.96	Pyramids
19	Marwan **ATTIA**	(27) 12.08.98	Al Ahly
25	**ZIZO**	(29) 10.01.96	Al Ahly
27	Mahmoud **SABER**	(24) 30.07.01	ZED

FORWARDS

7	**TREZEGUET**	(31) 01.10.94	Al Ahly
9	Salah **MOHSEN**	(27) 01.09.98	Al Masry
10	Mohamed **SALAH**	(33) 15.06.92	Liverpool (Eng)
11	Mostafa **MOHAMED**	(28) 28.11.97	Nantes (Fra)
18	Mostafa **FATHI**	(31) 12.05.94	Pyramids
20	Ibrahim **ADEL**	(24) 23.04.01	Al Jazira (UAE)
21	Osama **FAISAL**	(24) 01.01.01	National Bank of Egypt
22	Omar **MARMOUSH**	(26) 07.02.99	Man. City (Eng)

COACH

	Hossam **HASSAN**	(59) 10.08.66	

Equatorial Guinea...the Red Devils pose for a team photo

Round of 16...DR Congo came unstuck against Algeria

Amad Diallo...the Ivorian attacker impressed in Morocco

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jesus **OWONO**	(24) 01.03.01	FC Andorra (And)
13	Aitor **EMBELA**	(29) 17.04.96	Soneja (Spa)
23	Manuel **SAPUNGA**	(33) 23.11.92	Sekhukhune United (RSA)

DEFENDERS

2	Nestor **SENRA**	(23) 04.01.02	Recreativo (Spa)
3	Marvin **ANIEBOH**	(28) 26.08.97	SS Reyes (Spa)
11	Basilio **NDONG**	(26) 17.01.99	Tirana (Alb)
12	Charles **ONDO**	(22) 22.10.03	Portland Timbers (USA)
15	Carlos **AKAPO**	(32) 12.03.93	Amazonas (Bra)
16	Saul **COCO**	(26) 09.02.99	Torino (Ita)
18	Michael **NGAAH**	(22) 10.04.03	Avila (Spa)
21	Esteban **OBIANG**	(27) 07.05.98	Arges Pitesti (Rou)
25	Javier **MUM**	(24) 24.01.01	MUZA (Zam)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Alex **BALBOA**	(24) 06.03.01	Lugo (Spa)
5	Omar **MASCARELL**	(32) 02.02.93	Mallorca (Spa)
7	Jose **MACHIN**	(29) 14.08.96	Vis Pesaro (Ita)
8	Jannick **BUYLA**	(27) 06.10.98	Numancia (Spa)
14	Pedro **OBIANG**	(33) 27.03.92	Monza (Ita)
20	Santiago **ENEME**	(25) 29.09.00	Sparta Prague (Cze)
22	Pablo **GANET**	(31) 04.11.94	Persita Tangerang (Idn)
27	Gael Joel **AKOGO**	(22) 21.12.03	Granada (Spa)
28	Alex **MASOGO**	(24) 26.01.01	Beroe (Bul)

FORWARDS

6	Iban **SALVADOR**	(30) 11.12.95	Wisla Plock (Pol)
9	**DORIAN JR.**	(24) 12.05.01	Viborg (Den)
10	Emilio **NSUE**	(36) 30.09.89	Intercity (Spa)
17	Josete **MIRANDA**	(27) 22.07.98	Kalamata (Gre)
19	Luis **ASUE**	(24) 09.07.01	Shanghai Shenhua (Chn)
24	Loren **ZUNIGA**	(22) 18.01.03	Real Madrid (Spa)
26	Jose Nabil **ONDO**	(20) 23.11.05	Nantes (Fra)

COACH

	Juan **MICHA**	(50) 28.07.75	

GABON

GOALKEEPERS

1	Anse **NGOUBI DEMBA**	(25) 31.01.00	Mosta (Mlt)
16	Francois **BEKALE**	(23) 15.02.02	Hafia (Gui)
23	Loyce **MBABA**	(27) 04.05.98	Stella Club (Civ)

DEFENDERS

2	Aaron **APPINDANGOYE**	(33) 20.02.92	Sivasspor (Tur)
3	Anthony **OYONO**	(24) 12.04.01	Frosinone (Ita)
4	Alex **MOUCKETOU-MOUSSOUNDA**	(25) 10.10.00	Aris Limassol (Cyp)
5	Bruno **ECUELE MANGA**	(37) 16.07.88	Paris 13 Atletico (Fra)
6	Johann **OBIANG**	(32) 05.07.93	Orleans (Fra)
13	Mick **OMFIA**	(25) 10.12.00	Hafia (Gui)
14	Urie-Michel **MBOULA**	(22) 30.04.03	Metz (Fra)
19	Jacques **EKOMIE**	(22) 19.08.03	Angers (Fra)
21	Jeremy **OYONO**	(24) 12.04.01	Frosinone (Ita)
26	Jonathan **DO MARCOLINO**	(19) 10.05.06	Bourg-Peronnas (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

8	Clench **LOUFILOU**	(26) 12.04.99	Al Minaa (Irq)
12	Guelor **KANGA**	(35) 01.08.90	Esenler Erokspor (Tur)
15	Samake **NZE BAGNAMA**	(23) 28.06.02	Stade d'Abidjan (Civ)
17	Andre **BIYOGO POKO**	(32) 07.03.93	Amed (Tur)
18	Mario **LEMINA**	(32) 01.09.93	Galatasaray (Tur)
22	Didier **NDONG**	(31) 17.06.94	Esteghlal (Irn)
25	Eric **BOCOUM**	(29) 10.03.96	Gol Gohar Sirjan (Irn)

FORWARDS

7	Royce **OPENDA**	(23) 21.04.02	Bordeaux (Fra)
9	Pierre-Emerick **AUBAMEYANG**	(36) 18.06.89	Marseille (Fra)
10	Shavy **BABICKA**	(25) 01.06.00	Red Star Belgrade (Srb)
11	Jim **ALLEVINAH**	(30) 27.02.95	Angers (Fra)
20	Denis **BOUANGA**	(31) 11.11.94	Los Angeles FC (USA)
24	Edlin Randy **ESSANG-MATOUTI**	(22) 25.07.03	USM Khenchela (Alg)
27	Teddy **AVERLANT**	(26) 02.10.99	Amiens (Fra)
28	Malick **EVOUNA**	(33) 28.11.92	Mangasport

COACH

	Thierry **MOUYOUMA**	(50) 27.09.75	

IVORY COAST

GOALKEEPERS

1	Yahia **FOFANA**	(25) 21.08.00	Caykur Rizespor (Tur)
16	Mohamed **KONE**	(23) 07.03.02	Charleroi (Bel)
23	Alban **LAFONT**	(26) 23.01.99	Panathinaikos (Gre)

DEFENDERS

2	Ousmane **DIOMANDE**	(22) 04.12.03	Sporting (Por)
3	Ghislain **KONAN**	(29) 27.12.95	Gil Vicente (Por)
5	Armel **ZOHOURI**	(24) 05.04.01	Iberia 1999 (Geo)
7	Odilon **KOSSOUNOU**	(24) 04.01.01	Atalanta (Ita)
12	Willy **BOLY**	(34) 03.02.91	Nottingham Forest (Eng)
13	Christopher **OPERI**	(28) 29.04.97	Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur)
17	Guela **DOUE**	(23) 17.10.02	Strasbourg (Fra)
20	Emmanuel **AGBADOU**	(28) 07.06.97	Wolves (Eng)
21	Evan **NDICKA**	(26) 20.08.99	Roma (Ita)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Jean Michael **SERI**	(34) 19.07.91	Maribor (Svn)
6	Seko **FOFANA**	(30) 07.05.95	Rennes (Fra)
8	Franck **KESSIE**	(29) 19.12.96	Al Ahli (KSA)
18	Ibrahim **SANGARE**	(28) 02.12.97	Nottingham Forest (Eng)
19	Christ Inao **OULAI**	(19) 06.04.06	Trabzonspor (Tur)
25	Jean-Philippe **GBAMIN**	(30) 25.09.95	Metz (Fra)

FORWARDS

9	Vakoun Issouf **BAYO**	(28) 10.01.97	Udinese (Ita)
10	Wilfried **ZAHA**	(33) 10.11.92	Charlotte FC (USA)
11	Jean-Philippe **KRASSO**	(28) 17.07.97	Paris FC (Fra)
14	Oumar **DIAKITE**	(22) 20.12.03	Cercle Brugge (Bel)
15	**AMAD** Diallo	(23) 11.07.02	Man. United (Eng)
22	Evann **GUESSAND**	(24) 01.07.01	Aston Villa (Eng)
24	Bazoumana **TOURE**	(19) 02.03.06	Hoffenheim (Ger)
26	Yan **DIOMANDE**	(19) 14.11.06	RB Leipzig (Ger)

COACH

	Emerse **FAE**	(41) 24.01.84	

(Ages as of 21.12.25)

2025 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

MALI

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Ismael **DIAWARA**	(31) 11.11.94	Sirius (Swe)
16	Djigui **DIARRA**	(30) 27.02.95	Young Africans (Tan)
22	Mamadou **SAMASSA**	(35) 16.02.90	Laval (Fra)
DEFENDERS			
2	Hamari **TRAORE**	(33) 27.01.92	Paris FC (Fra)
3	Amadou **DANTE**	(25) 07.10.00	Arouca (Por)
5	Abdoulaye **DIABY**	(25) 04.07.00	Grasshopper (Sui)
6	Sikou **NIAKATE**	(26) 10.07.99	Braga (Por)
13	Fode **DOUCOURE**	(24) 03.02.01	Le Havre (Fra)
15	Mamadou **FOFANA**	(27) 21.01.98	New England Revolution (USA)
25	Ousmane **CAMARA**	(22) 06.03.03	Angers (Fra)
26	Woyo **COULIBALY**	(26) 26.05.99	Sassuolo (Ita)
28	Nathan **GASSAMA**	(24) 05.01.01	Baltika Kaliningrad (Rus)
MIDFIELDERS			
4	Amadou **HAIDARA**	(27) 31.01.98	RB Leipzig (Ger)
8	Mahamadou **DOUMBIA**	(21) 15.05.04	Al Ittihad (KSA)
10	Yves **BISSOUMA**	(29) 30.08.96	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
11	Lassana **COULIBALY**	(29) 10.04.96	Lecce (Ita)
12	Mohamed **CAMARA**	(25) 06.01.00	Al Sadd (Qat)
19	Kamory **DOUMBIA**	(22) 18.02.03	Brest (Fra)
20	Mamadou **SANGARE**	(23) 26.06.02	Lens (Fra)
23	Aliou **DIENG**	(28) 15.10.97	Al Ahly (Egy)
24	Ibrahima **SISSOKO**	(28) 27.10.97	Bochum (Ger)
FORWARDS			
7	Dorgeles **NENE**	(22) 23.12.02	Fenerbahce (Tur)
9	El Bilal **TOURE**	(24) 03.10.01	Besiktas (Tur)
14	Mamadou **CAMARA**	(24) 07.02.01	Laval (Fra)
17	Lassine **SINAYOKO**	(26) 08.12.99	Auxerre (Fra)
18	Mamadou **DOUMBIA**	(19) 18.02.06	Watford (Eng)
21	Gaoussou **DIARRA**	(23) 21.11.02	Feyenoord (Ned)
27	Gaoussou **DIAKITE**	(20) 26.09.05	Lausanne-Sport (Sui)
COACH			
	Tom **SAINTFIET** (Bel)	(52) 29.03.73	

MOROCCO

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Yassine **BOUNOU**	(34) 05.04.91	Al Hilal (KSA)
12	Munir **MOHAMEDI**	(36) 10.05.89	RS Berkane
22	El Mehdi **AL HARRAR**	(25) 30.11.00	Raja
DEFENDERS			
2	Achraf **HAKIMI**	(27) 04.11.98	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
3	Noussair **MAZRAOUI**	(28) 14.11.97	Man. United (Eng)
5	Nayef **AGUERD**	(29) 30.03.96	Marseille (Fra)
6	Romain **SAISS**	(35) 26.03.90	Al Sadd (Qat)
15	Mohamed **CHIBI**	(32) 21.01.93	Pyramids (Egy)
18	Jawad **EL YAMIQ**	(33) 29.02.92	Al Najma (KSA)
25	Adam **MASINA**	(31) 02.01.94	Torino (Ita)
26	Anass **SALAH-EDDINE**	(23) 18.01.02	PSV (Ned)
27	Abdelhamid Ait **BOUDLAL**	(19) 16.04.06	Rennes (Fra)
28	Youssef **BELAMMARI**	(27) 20.09.98	Raja
MIDFIELDERS			
4	Sofyan **AMRABAT**	(29) 21.08.96	Real Betis (Spa)
8	Azzedine **OUNAHI**	(25) 19.04.00	Girona (Spa)
11	Ismael **SAIBARI**	(24) 28.01.01	PSV (Ned)
13	Eliesse **BEN SEGHIR**	(20) 16.02.05	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
14	Oussama **TARGHALLINE**	(23) 20.05.02	Feyenoord (Ned)
23	Bilal **EL KHANNOUSS**	(21) 10.05.04	Stuttgart (Ger)
24	Neil **EL AYNAOUI**	(24) 02.07.01	Roma (Ita)
FORWARDS			
7	Hamza **IGAMANE**	(23) 02.11.02	Lille (Fra)
9	Soufiane **RAHIMI**	(29) 02.06.96	Al Ain (UAE)
10	**BRAHIM** Diaz	(26) 03.08.99	Real Madrid (Spa)
16	Ilias **AKHOMACH**	(21) 16.04.04	Villarreal (Spa)
17	Abde **EZZALZOULI**	(24) 17.12.01	Real Betis (Spa)
19	Youssef **EN-NESYRI**	(28) 01.06.97	Fenerbahce (Tur)
20	Ayoub **EL KAABI**	(32) 25.06.93	Olympiacos (Gre)
21	Chemsdine **TALBI**	(20) 09.05.05	Sunderland (Eng)
COACH			
	Walid **REGRAGUI**	(50) 23.09.75	

MOZAMBIQUE

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Ernan **SILUANE**	(27) 09.07.98	Black Bulls
12	Kimiss **ZAVALA**	(21) 08.05.04	Maritimo (Por)
22	Ivane **URRUBAL**	(28) 01.03.97	Songo
DEFENDERS			
2	**NANANI**	(29) 08.02.96	Songo
3	**NENE**	(29) 15.11.96	Black Bulls
4	Fernando **CHAMBOCO**	(27) 15.06.98	Black Bulls
5	Bruno **LANGA**	(28) 31.10.97	Pafos (Cyp)
8	Edmilson **DOVE**	(31) 18.07.94	Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq)
14	Oscar **CHERENE**	(22) 28.03.03	Textafrica
15	**REINILDO** Mandava	(31) 21.01.94	Sunderland (Eng)
17	**MEXER**	(38) 08.09.87	Ankara Kecioreng ucu (Tur)
23	Diogo **CALILA**	(27) 10.10.98	Santa Clara (Por)
MIDFIELDERS			
6	Manuel **KAMBALA**	(34) 21.08.91	Polokwane City (RSA)
7	**DOMINGUES**	(42) 13.11.83	Songo
11	Joao **BONDE**	(28) 09.01.97	Ferroviario Beira
16	Alfons **AMADE**	(26) 12.11.99	Dunfermline Athletic (Sco)
20	Keyns **ABDALA**	(22) 15.03.03	Chaves (Por)
21	**GUIMA**	(30) 14.11.95	Zira (Aze)
28	**SHAQUILLE**	(28) 24.11.97	Sagrada Esperanca (Ang)
FORWARDS			
9	Faisal **BANGAL**	(30) 05.01.95	Mestre (Ita)
10	Geny **CATAMO**	(24) 26.01.01	Sporting (Por)
13	Stanley **RATIFO**	(31) 05.12.94	Chemie Leipzig (Ger)
18	Gildo **VILANCULOS**	(30) 31.01.95	Tadamon Sour (Lbn)
19	**WITI**	(29) 26.08.96	Nacional (Por)
24	Melque **ALEXANDRE**	(28) 26.06.97	Songo
25	**CHAMITO**	(21) 14.01.04	Academico Viseu (Por)
26	Angelo **CANTOLO**	(22) 23.05.03	Chingale
27	**CLESIO**	(31) 11.10.94	Black Bulls
COACH			
	Chiquinho **CONDE**	(60) 22.11.65	

Goal king...Victor Osimhen scored four goals for Nigeria

AFCON top scorer...Morocco's Brahim Diaz netted five goals

History...Mozambique won their first-ever AFCON game

NIGERIA

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Francis **UZOHO**	(27) 28.10.98	Omonia (Cyp)
16	Amas **OBASOGIE**	(25) 27.12.99	Singida Black Stars (Tan)
23	Stanley **NWABALI**	(29) 10.06.96	Chippa United (RSA)
DEFENDERS			
2	Bright **OSAYI-SAMUEL**	(27) 31.12.97	Birmingham City (Eng)
3	Zaidu **SANUSI**	(28) 13.06.97	Porto (Por)
5	Igoh **OGBU**	(25) 08.02.00	Slavia Prague (Cze)
6	Semi **AJAYI**	(32) 09.11.93	Hull City (Eng)
13	Bruno **ONYEMAECHI**	(26) 03.04.99	Olympiacos (Gre)
20	Chidozie **AWAZIEM**	(28) 01.01.97	Nantes (Fra)
21	Calvin **BASSEY**	(25) 31.12.99	Fulham (Eng)
27	Ryan **ALEBIOSU**	(24) 17.12.01	Blackburn Rovers (Eng)
MIDFIELDERS			
4	Wilfred **NDIDI**	(29) 16.12.96	Besiktas (Tur)
8	Frank **ONYEKA**	(27) 01.01.98	Brentford (Eng)
10	Fisayo **DELE-BASHIRU**	(24) 06.02.01	Lazio (Ita)
14	Muhammed **USMAN EDU**	(31) 02.03.94	Ironi Tiberias (Isr)
17	Alex **IWOBI**	(29) 03.05.96	Fulham (Eng)
18	Raphael **ONYEDIKA**	(24) 19.04.01	Club Brugge (Bel)
26	Ebenezer **AKINSANMIRO**	(21) 25.11.04	Pisa (Ita)
28	Tochukwu **NNADI**	(22) 30.06.03	Zulte Waregem (Bel)
FORWARDS			
7	Ademola **LOOKMAN**	(28) 20.10.97	Atalanta (Ita)
9	Victor **OSIMHEN**	(26) 29.12.98	Galatasaray (Tur)
11	Samuel **CHUKWUEZE**	(26) 22.05.99	Fulham (Eng)
12	Cyriel **DESSERS**	(31) 08.12.94	Panathinaikos (Gre)
15	Moses **SIMON**	(30) 12.07.95	Paris FC (Fra)
19	Paul **ONUACHU**	(31) 28.05.94	Trabzonspor (Tur)
22	Akor **ADAMS**	(25) 29.01.00	Sevilla (Spa)
24	Chidera **EJUKE**	(27) 02.01.98	Sevilla (Spa)
25	Salim Fago **LAWAL**	(22) 15.01.03	Istra 1961 (Cro)
COACH			
	Eric **CHELLE** (Mli)	(48) 11.11.77	

SENEGAL

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Yehvann **DIOUF**	(26) 16.11.99	Nice (Fra)
16	Edouard **MENDY**	(33) 01.03.92	Al Ahli (KSA)
23	Mory **DIAW**	(32) 22.06.93	Le Havre (Fra)
DEFENDERS			
2	Mamadou **SARR**	(20) 29.08.05	Strasbourg (Fra)
3	Kalidou **KOULIBALY**	(34) 20.06.91	Al Hilal (KSA)
4	Abdoulaye **SECK**	(33) 04.06.92	Maccabi Haifa (Isr)
14	Ismail **JAKOBS**	(26) 17.08.99	Galatasaray (Tur)
15	Krepin **DIATTA**	(26) 25.02.99	Monaco (Fra)
19	Moussa **NIAKHATE**	(29) 08.03.96	Lyon (Fra)
24	Antoine **MENDY**	(21) 27.05.04	Nice (Fra)
25	El Hadji Malick **DIOUF**	(20) 28.12.04	West Ham United (Eng)
MIDFIELDERS			
5	Idrissa Gana **GUEYE**	(36) 26.09.89	Everton (Eng)
6	Pathe **CISS**	(31) 16.03.94	Rayo Vallecano (Spa)
7	Habib **DIARRA**	(21) 03.01.04	Sunderland (Eng)
8	Lamine **CAMARA**	(21) 05.01.04	Monaco (Fra)
17	Pape Matar **SARR**	(23) 14.09.02	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
22	Ousseynou **NIANG**	(24) 12.10.01	Union SG (Bel)
26	Pape **GUEYE**	(26) 24.01.99	Villarreal (Spa)
28	Mamadou **CAMARA**	(22) 05.01.03	RS Berkane (Mar)
FORWARDS			
9	Boulaye **DIA**	(29) 16.11.96	Lazio (Ita)
10	Sadio **MANE**	(33) 10.04.92	Al Nassr (KSA)
11	Nicolas **JACKSON**	(24) 20.06.01	Bayern Munich (Ger)
12	Cherif **NDIAYE**	(29) 23.01.96	Samsunspor (Tur)
13	Iliman **NDIAYE**	(25) 06.03.00	Everton (Eng)
18	Ismaila **SARR**	(27) 25.02.98	Crystal Palace (Eng)
20	Habib **DIALLO**	(30) 18.06.95	Metz (Fra)
21	Cheikh **SABALY**	(26) 04.03.99	Metz (Fra)
27	Ibrahim **MBAYE**	(17) 24.01.08	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
COACH			
	Pape **THIAW**	(44) 05.02.81	

SOUTH AFRICA

GOALKEEPERS			
1	Ronwen **WILLIAMS**	(33) 21.01.92	Mamelodi Sundowns
16	Sipho **CHAINE**	(29) 14.12.96	Orlando Pirates
22	Ricardo **GOSS**	(31) 02.04.94	Siwelele
DEFENDERS			
2	Tylon **SMITH**	(20) 09.05.05	Queens Park Rangers (Eng)
3	Khulumani **NDAMANE**	(21) 05.02.04	TS Galaxy
6	Aubrey **MODIBA**	(30) 22.07.95	Mamelodi Sundowns
14	Mbekezeli **MBOKAZI**	(20) 19.09.05	Orlando Pirates
18	Samukele **KABINI**	(21) 15.03.04	Molde (Nor)
19	Nkosinathi **SIBISI**	(30) 22.09.95	Orlando Pirates
20	Khuliso **MUDAU**	(30) 26.04.95	Mamelodi Sundowns
21	Siyabonga **NGEZANA**	(28) 15.07.97	FCSB (Rou)
25	Thabang **MATULUDI**	(26) 14.01.99	Polokwane City
28	Thabo **MOLOISANE**	(26) 24.02.99	Stellenbosch
MIDFIELDERS			
4	Teboho **MOKOENA**	(28) 24.01.97	Mamelodi Sundowns
5	Thalente **MBATHA**	(25) 06.03.00	Orlando Pirates
13	Sphephelo **SITHOLE**	(26) 03.03.99	Tondela (Por)
15	Bathusi **AUBAAS**	(27) 11.07.98	Mamelodi Sundowns
17	Sipho **MBULE**	(27) 22.03.98	Orlando Pirates
26	Mduduzi **SHABALALA**	(21) 20.01.04	Kaizer Chiefs
FORWARDS			
7	Oswin **APPOLLIS**	(24) 25.08.01	Orlando Pirates
8	Tshepang **MOREMI**	(25) 02.10.00	Orlando Pirates
9	Lyle **FOSTER**	(25) 09.05.00	Burnley (Eng)
10	Relebohile **MOFOKENG**	(21) 23.10.04	Orlando Pirates
11	Mohau **NKOTA**	(21) 09.11.04	Al Ettifaq (KSA)
12	Elias **MOKWANA**	(26) 08.09.99	Al Hazem (KSA)
23	Evidence **MAKGOPA**	(25) 05.06.00	Orlando Pirates
24	Shandre **CAMPBELL**	(20) 15.07.05	Club Brugge (Bel)
27	Iqraam **RAYNERS**	(30) 19.12.95	Mamelodi Sundowns
COACH			
	Hugo **BROOS** (Bel)	(73) 10.04.52	

SUDAN

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ali Abu **ESHREIN**	(36) 06.12.89	Al Hilal
16	Muhamed Alnour **ABOUJA**	(25) 01.01.00	Al Merrikh
21	Munjed **ALNIL**	(29) 01.01.96	Al Merrikh

DEFENDERS

3	Mohamed **ERING**	(28) 20.10.97	Al Hilal
4	Altayeb **ABDELRAZEG**	(34) 06.09.91	Al Hilal
6	Mustafa **KARSHOUM**	(33) 06.12.92	Al Hilal
7	Yaser **AWAD**	(20) 15.03.05	Al Hilal
12	Bakhit **KHAMIS**	(31) 01.01.94	Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
17	Mazin **MOHAMEDEIN**	(25) 02.05.00	Al Akhdar (Lby)
18	Awad **ZAYED**	(32) 01.01.93	Al Merrikh
19	Ahmed **TABANJA**	(25) 02.09.00	Al Merrikh
24	Muhamed **KESRA**	(29) 25.10.96	Jamus (Ssd)
25	Sheddy **BARGLAN**	(23) 03.10.02	Den Bosch (Ned)

MIDFIELDERS

2	Abuaagla **ABDALLA**	(32) 11.03.93	Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby)
5	Walieldin **KHEDR**	(30) 15.09.95	Al Hilal
8	Abdel **RAOUF**	(32) 18.07.93	Al Hilal
13	Ammar **TAIFOUR**	(28) 12.04.97	Sfaxien (Tun)
15	Salah **ADEL**	(30) 03.04.95	Al Hilal
23	Abdelsamad **MANEN**	(20) 04.05.05	Al Zamala

FORWARDS

9	Yaser **MUZMEL**	(33) 01.01.92	Al Hilal
10	Mohamed **ABDELRAHMAN**	(32) 10.07.93	Al Hilal
11	John **MANO**	(24) 12.12.01	Al Akhdar (Lby)
14	Mohamed **EISA**	(31) 12.07.94	Uthai Thani (Tha)
20	Abo **EISA**	(29) 05.01.96	Chonburi (Tha)
22	Al Jezoli **NOUH**	(23) 24.10.02	Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
26	Aamir **ABDALLAH**	(26) 08.05.99	Avondale (Aus)
27	Muhamed **TIA ASAD**	(24) 21.02.01	Al Merrikh

COACH

James Kwesi **APPIAH** (Gha)	(65) 30.06.60	

TANZANIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Hussein **MASALANGA**	(33) 04.03.92	Singida Black Stars
13	Yakoub **SULEIMAN ALI**	(26) 07.12.99	Simba
28	Zuberi **FOBA**	(23) 23.05.02	Azam

DEFENDERS

2	Pascal **MSINDO**	(22) 15.08.03	Azam
3	Nickson **KIBABAGE**	(25) 12.10.00	Simba
4	Ibrahim **HAMAD**	(28) 12.11.97	Young Africans
5	Dickson **JOB**	(24) 29.12.00	Young Africans
14	Bakari **MWAMNYETO**	(30) 05.10.95	Young Africans
15	Mohamed **HUSSEINI**	(29) 01.11.96	Young Africans
16	Wilson **NANGU**	(24) 30.09.01	Simba
19	Lusajo **MWAIKENDA**	(25) 27.10.00	Azam
20	Novatus **MIROSHI**	(23) 02.09.02	Goztepe (Tur)
22	Shomari **KAPOMBE**	(33) 28.01.92	Simba

MIDFIELDERS

6	Feisal **SALUM**	(27) 11.01.98	Azam
8	Charles **M'MOMBWA**	(27) 14.03.98	Floriana (Mlt)
17	Khalid **HABIBU IDDI**	(24) 10.09.01	Singida Black Stars
18	Morice **ABRAHAM**	(22) 13.08.03	Simba
23	Yusuph **KAGOMA**	(29) 01.02.96	Simba
24	Kelvin **NASHON**	(25) 02.08.00	Pamba
25	Haji **MNOGA**	(23) 16.04.02	Salford City (Eng)
26	Tarryn **ALLARAKHIA**	(28) 17.11.97	Rochdale (Eng)
27	Alphonce **MSANGA**	(22) 14.06.03	Samaxi (Aze)

FORWARDS

7	Iddy **NADO**	(30) 03.11.95	Azam
9	Selemani **MWALIMU**	(19) 19.01.06	Simba
10	Mbwana **SAMATTA**	(32) 23.12.92	Le Havre (Fra)
11	Kibu **DENIS**	(25) 04.12.00	Simba
12	Simon **MSUVA**	(32) 02.10.93	Al Talaba (Irq)
21	Kelvin **JOHN**	(22) 10.06.03	AaB (Den)

COACH

Miguel **GAMONDI** (Arg)	(59) 30.11.66	

TUNISIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Noureddine **FARHATI**	(25) 14.09.00	Stade Tunisien
16	Aymen **DAHMEN**	(28) 28.01.97	Sfaxien
22	Bechir **BEN SAID**	(31) 29.11.94	Esperance
28	Sabri **BEN HESSEN**	(29) 13.06.96	Etoile du Sahel

DEFENDERS

2	Ali **ABDI**	(32) 20.12.93	Nice (Fra)
3	Montassar **TALBI**	(27) 26.05.98	Lorient (Fra)
4	Yassine **MERIAH**	(32) 02.07.93	Esperance
6	Dylan **BRONN**	(30) 19.06.95	Servette (Sui)
12	Ali **MAALOUL**	(35) 01.01.90	Sfaxien
14	Mohamed **BEN ALI**	(30) 16.02.95	Esperance
18	Nader **GHANDRI**	(30) 18.02.95	Akhmat Grozny (Rus)
20	Yan **VALERY**	(26) 22.02.99	Sheffield Wednesday (Eng)
21	Mortadha **BEN OUANES**	(31) 02.07.94	Kasimpasa (Tur)
24	Adem **AROUS**	(21) 17.07.04	Kasimpasa (Tur)

MIDFIELDERS

5	Mohamed Ali **BEN ROMDHANE**	(26) 06.09.99	Al Ahly (Egy)
10	**HANNIBAL** Mejbri	(22) 21.01.03	Burnley (Eng)
11	Ismael **GHARBI**	(21) 10.04.04	Augsburg (Ger)
13	Ferjani **SASSI**	(33) 18.03.92	Al Gharafa (Qat)
15	Hadj **MAHMOUD**	(25) 24.04.00	Lugano (Sui)
17	Ellyes **SKHIRI**	(30) 10.05.95	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
25	Houssem **TKA**	(25) 16.08.00	Esperance

FORWARDS

7	Elias **ACHOURI**	(26) 10.02.99	Copenhagen (Den)
8	Elias **SAAD**	(25) 27.12.99	Augsburg (Ger)
9	Hazem **MASTOURI**	(28) 18.06.97	Dynamo Makhachkala (Rus)
19	Firas **CHAOUAT**	(29) 08.05.96	Club Africain
23	Naim **SLITI**	(33) 27.07.92	Al Shamal (Qat)
26	Sebastian **TOUNEKTI**	(23) 13.07.02	Celtic (Sco)
27	Seifeddine **JAZIRI**	(32) 11.02.93	Zamalek (Egy)

COACH

Sami **TRABELSI**	(57) 04.02.68	

Uganda...the Cranes were at their first AFCON since 2019

Taifa Stars...Tanzania made the knockouts for the first time

Dejected...Tunisia lost on penalties to Mali in the last 16

UGANDA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Nafian **ALIONZI**	(29) 01.03.96	Defence Force (Eth)
18	Denis **ONYANGO**	(40) 15.05.85	Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)
19	Jamal **SALIM**	(30) 27.05.95	Richards Bay (RSA)

DEFENDERS

2	Rogers **TORACH**	(22) 23.06.03	Vipers
3	Timothy **AWANY**	(29) 06.08.96	Ashdod (Isr)
5	Toby **SIBBICK**	(26) 23.05.99	Burton Albion (Eng)
13	Elio **CAPRADOSSI**	(29) 11.03.96	Universitatea Cluj (Rou)
15	Jordan **OBITA**	(32) 08.12.93	Hibernian (Sco)
20	Isaac **MULEME**	(33) 10.10.92	Viktoria Zizkov (Cze)
23	Aziz **KAYONDO**	(23) 06.10.02	Slovan Liberec (Cze)
26	Hilary **MUKUNDANE**	(27) 22.12.97	Vipers

MIDFIELDERS

4	Kenneth **SEMAKULA**	(23) 14.11.02	Al Adalah (KSA)
6	Bobosi **BYARUHANGA**	(24) 03.12.01	Oakland Roots (USA)
8	Khalid **AUCHO**	(32) 08.08.93	Singida Black Stars (Tan)
10	Travis **MUTYABA**	(20) 07.08.05	Sfaxien (Tun)
12	Baba **ALHASSAN**	(25) 03.01.00	FCSB (Rou)
16	Ronald **SSEKIGANDA**	(30) 13.09.95	APR (Rwa)
21	Allan **OKELLO**	(25) 04.07.00	Vipers

FORWARDS

7	Rogers **MATO**	(27) 20.10.98	Vardar (Mkd)
9	Uche **MUBIRU IKPEAZU**	(30) 28.02.95	St Johnstone (Sco)
11	Steven **MUKWALA**	(26) 15.07.99	Simba (Tan)
14	Denis **OMEDI**	(29) 13.06.96	APR (Rwa)
17	Reagan **MPANDE**	(25) 07.05.00	Villa
22	Jude **SSEMUGABI**	(28) 03.03.97	Jamus (Ssd)
24	James **BOGERE**	(17) 02.02.08	Masaka Sunshine
25	Shafik Nana **KWIKIRIZA**	(21) 03.03.04	KCCA
27	Melvyn **LORENZEN**	(31) 26.11.94	Muangthong United (Tha)
28	Ivan **AHIMBISIBWE**	(30) 23.11.95	KCCA

COACH

Paul **PUT** (Bel)	(69) 26.05.56	

ZAMBIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Willard **MWANZA**	(28) 03.06.97	Power Dynamos
16	Lawrence **MULENGA**	(27) 21.08.98	Power Dynamos
18	Francis **MWANSA**	(23) 14.07.02	Zanaco

DEFENDERS

2	Mathews **BANDA**	(20) 06.08.05	Nkana
3	Obino **CHISALA**	(26) 14.09.99	Al Merrikh (Sdn)
4	Frankie **MUSONDA**	(28) 12.12.97	Bahrain SC (Bhr)
6	Benson **SAKALA**	(29) 12.09.96	Bohemians 1905 (Cze)
13	Stoppila **SUNZU**	(36) 22.06.89	Changchun Yatai (Chn)
14	Kabaso **CHONGO**	(33) 11.02.92	ZESCO United
21	Dominic **CHANDA**	(29) 26.02.96	Power Dynamos
22	David **HAMANSENYA**	(18) 24.06.07	Leganes (Spa)
24	Gift **MPHANDE**	(22) 19.11.03	ZESCO United

MIDFIELDERS

5	Miguel **CHAIWA**	(21) 07.06.04	Hibernian (Sco)
8	Lubambo **MUSONDA**	(30) 01.03.95	Magdeburg (Ger)
11	Joseph **SABOBO**	(20) 17.12.05	Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr)
12	Wilson **CHISALA**	(23) 25.05.02	Zanaco
15	Given **KALUSA**	(17) 11.08.08	MUZA
17	Kings **KANGWA**	(26) 06.04.99	Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr)
23	Pascal **PHIRI**	(20) 17.07.05	ZESCO United
25	Owen **TEMBO**	(30) 16.05.95	Power Dynamos
26	Joseph **LITETA**	(19) 22.02.06	Cagliari (Ita)
28	David **SIMUKONDA**	(20) 10.08.05	ZESCO United

FORWARDS

7	Jack **LAHNE**	(24) 24.10.01	Austria Lustenau (Aut)
9	Lameck **BANDA**	(24) 29.01.01	Lecce (Ita)
10	Fashion **SAKALA**	(28) 14.03.97	Al Fayha (KSA)
19	Kennedy **MUSONDA**	(30) 28.12.94	Hapoel Ramat Gan (Isr)
20	Patson **DAKA**	(27) 09.10.98	Leicester City (Eng)
27	Elia **MANDANJI**	(18) 20.11.07	Zanaco

COACH

Moses **SICHONE**	(48) 31.05.77	

ZIMBABWE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Elvis **CHIPEZEZE**	(35) 11.03.90	Magesi (RSA)
16	Martin **MAPISA**	(27) 25.05.98	MWOS
22	Washington **ARUBI**	(40) 29.08.85	Marumo Gallants (RSA)

DEFENDERS

2	Gerald **TAKWARA**	(31) 29.10.94	Al Ittihad Misurata (Lby)
3	Sean **FUSIRE**	(20) 31.05.05	Sheffield Wednesday (Eng)
4	Munashe **GARANANGA**	(24) 18.01.01	Copenhagen (Den)
5	Divine **LUNGA**	(30) 28.05.95	Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)
13	Brendan **GALLOWAY**	(29) 17.03.96	Plymouth Argyle (Eng)
15	Teenage **HADEBE**	(30) 17.09.95	FC Cincinnati (USA)
21	Godknows **MURWIRA**	(32) 04.07.93	Scottland
23	Emmanuel **JALAI**	(26) 06.01.99	Dynamos
24	Isheanesu **MAUCHI**	(23) 28.11.02	Simba Bhora
25	Alec **MUDIMU**	(30) 08.04.95	Flint Town United (Wal)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Prosper **PADERA**	(19) 09.10.06	SJK (Fin)
8	Jonah **FABISCH**	(24) 13.08.01	Erzgebirge Aue (Ger)
10	Andy **RINOMHOTA**	(28) 21.04.97	Reading (Eng)
17	Knowledge **MUSONA**	(35) 21.06.90	Scottland
18	Marvelous **NAKAMBA**	(31) 19.01.94	Luton Town (Eng)
20	Tawanda **CHIREWA**	(22) 11.10.03	Wolves (Eng)
28	Tadiwa **CHAKUCHICHI**	(16) 01.06.09	Scottland

FORWARDS

7	Prince **DUBE**	(28) 17.02.97	Young Africans (Tan)
9	Macauley **BONNE**	(30) 26.10.95	Maldon & Tiptree (Eng)
11	Washington **NAVAYA**	(27) 29.04.98	TelOne
12	Bill **ANTONIO**	(23) 03.09.02	Mechelen (Bel)
14	Daniel **MSENDAMI**	(25) 24.10.00	Marumo Gallants (RSA)
19	Tawanda **MASWANHISE**	(23) 20.11.02	Motherwell (Sco)
26	Ishmael **WADI**	(33) 19.12.92	CAPS United
27	Junior **ZINDOGA**	(27) 28.07.98	TS Galaxy (RSA)

COACH

Mario **MARINICA** (Rou)	(61) 13.12.64	

(Ages as of 21.12.25)

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	17
Mike Maignan (Milan)	5
Anatoliy Trubin (Benfica)	5
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	3
Mile Svilar (Roma)	3
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	1
Joan Garcia (Barcelona)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Luiz Junior (Villarreal)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Matvey Safonov (PSG)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	18
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	12
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	9
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	9
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	9
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	8
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	8
William Saliba (Arsenal)	7
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	6
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	5
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Marc Guehi (Manchester City)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	3
Patrick Dorgu (Manchester United)	3
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	3
Nico Schlotterbeck (B. Dortmund)	3
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	3
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Piero Hincapie (Arsenal)	2
Nico O'Reilly (Manchester City)	2
Willian Pacho (PSG)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Marseille)	2
Josip Stanisic (Bayern Munich)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	1
Jan Bednarek (Porto)	1
Yann Bisseck (Internazionale)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Matty Cash (Aston Villa)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	1
Sergino Dest (PSV)	1
Wesley Fofana (Chelsea)	1
Matteo Gabbia (Milan)	1
Eric Garcia (Barcelona)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Dean Huijsen (Real Madrid)	1
Ferdi Kadioglu (Brighton)	1
Jakub Kiwior (Porto)	1
Ezri Konsa (Aston Villa)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Marquinhos (PSG)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Manchester United)	1
Moussa Niakhate (Lyon)	1
Marco Palestra (Cagliari)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Milan)	1
Marcos Senesi (Bournemouth)	1
Malick Thiaw (Newcastle United)	1
Matthieu Udol (Lens)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	15
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	14
Vitinha (PSG)	14
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	7
Lennart Karl (Bayern Munich)	6
Luka Modric (Milan)	6
Pedri (Barcelona)	6
Rayan Cherki (Manchester City)	5
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	5
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	5
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	4
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	4
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	3
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	3
Florian Wirtz (Liverpool)	3
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	2
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Joao Neves (PSG)	2
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Morgan Rogers (Aston Villa)	2
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Nathan De Cat (Anderlecht)	1
Pape Gueye (Villarreal)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Richard Rios (Benfica)	1
Alexis Saelemaekers (Milan)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Florian Thauvin (Lens)	1

FORWARDS

Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	39
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	33
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	24
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	8
Raphinha (Barcelona)	5
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Luis Diaz (Bayern Munich)	3
Antoine Semenyo (Manchester City)	3
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Ousmane Dembele (PSG)	2
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	2
David Neres (Napoli)	2
Joao Pedro (Chelsea)	2
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	2
Kenan Yildiz (Juventus)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Matheus Cunha (Manchester United)	1
Brahim Diaz (Real Madrid)	1
Yan Diomande (RB Leipzig)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Estevao (Chelsea)	1
Viktor Gyokeres (Arsenal)	1
Kasper Hogh (Bodo/Glimt)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Napoli)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Troy Parrott (AZ)	1
Vangelis Pavlidis (Benfica)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Luis Suarez (Sporting)	1
Crysencio Summerville (West Ham)	1
Igor Thiago (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

Internationals

2025 AFCON

Group A

Dec 21 – Rabat
Morocco 2 (Brahim 55, El Kaabi 74)
Comoros 0

Dec 22 – Casablanca
Mali 1 (Sinayoko 61)
Zambia 1 (Daka 90+2)

Dec 26 – Casablanca
Zambia 0
Comoros 0

Dec 26 – Rabat
Morocco 1 (Brahim 45+5 pen)
Mali 1 (Sinayoko 64 pen)

Dec 29 – Rabat
Zambia 0
Morocco 3 (El Kaabi 9, 50, Brahim 27)

Dec 29 – Casablanca
Comoros 0
Mali 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco*	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Mali*	3	0	3	0	2	2	3
Comoros	3	0	2	1	0	2	2
Zambia	3	0	2	1	1	4	2

*Advance to knockout rounds

Group B

Dec 22 – Marrakesh
South Africa 2 (Appollis 21, Foster 79)
Angola 1 (Show 35)

Dec 22 – Agadir
Egypt 2 (Marmoush 64, Salah 90+1)
Zimbabwe 1 (Dube 20)

Dec 26 – Marrakesh
Angola 1 (Dala 24)
Zimbabwe 1 (Musona 45+6)

Dec 26 – Agadir
Egypt 1 (Salah 45 pen)
South Africa 0

Dec 29 – Agadir
Angola 0
Egypt 0

Dec 29 – Marrakesh
Zimbabwe 2 (Maswanhise 19, Modiba 73 og)
South Africa 3 (Moremi 7, Foster 50, Appollis 82 pen)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt*	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
South Africa*	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Angola	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Zimbabwe	3	0	1	2	4	6	1

*Advance to knockout rounds

Group C

Dec 23 – Fez
Nigeria 2 (Ajayi 36, Lookman 52)
Tanzania 1 (M'Mombwa 50)

Dec 23 – Rabat
Tunisia 3 (Skhiri 10, Achouri 40, 64)
Uganda 1 (Omedi 90+2)

Dec 27 – Rabat
Uganda 1 (Mubiru Ikpeazu 80)
Tanzania 1 (Msuva 59 pen)

Dec 27 – Fez
Nigeria 3 (Osimhen 44, Ndidi 50, Lookman 67)
Tunisia 2 (Talbi 74, Abdi 87 pen)

Dec 30 – Fez
Uganda 1 (Mato 75)
Nigeria 3 (Onuachu 28, Onyedika 62, 67)

Dec 30 – Rabat
Tanzania 1 (Salum 48)
Tunisia 1 (Gharbi 43 pen)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria*	3	3	0	0	8	4	9
Tunisia*	3	1	1	1	6	5	4
Tanzania*	3	0	2	1	3	4	2
Uganda	3	0	1	2	3	7	1

*Advance to knockout rounds

Group D

Dec 23 – Rabat
DR Congo 1 (Bongonda 16)
Benin 0

Dec 23 – Tangier
Senegal 3 (Jackson 40, 58, C. Ndiaye 90)
Botswana 0

Dec 27 – Rabat
Benin 1 (Roche 28)
Botswana 0

Dec 27 – Tangier
Senegal 1 (Mane 69)
DR Congo 1 (Bakambu 61)

Dec 30 – Tangier
Benin 0
Senegal 3 (Seck 38, H. Diallo 62, C. Ndiaye 90+7 pen)

Dec 30 – Rabat
Botswana 0
DR Congo 3 (Mbuku 31, Kakuta 41 pen, 60)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal*	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
DR Congo*	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
Benin*	3	1	0	2	1	4	3
Botswana	3	0	0	3	0	7	0

*Advance to knockout rounds

Group E

Dec 24 – Casablanca
Burkina Faso 2 (Minoungou 90+5, Tapsoba 90+8)
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Anieboh 85)

Dec 24 – Rabat
Algeria 3 (Mahrez 2, 61, Maza 85)
Sudan 0

Dec 28 – Casablanca
Equatorial Guinea 0
Sudan 1 (Coco 74 og)

Dec 28 – Rabat
Algeria 1 (Mahrez 23 pen)
Burkina Faso 0

Dec 31 – Rabat
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Nsue 50)
Algeria 3 (Belaid 19, Chaibi 25, Maza 32)

Dec 31 – Casablanca
Sudan 0
Burkina Faso 2 (L. Traore 16, Kouassi 85)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria*	3	3	0	0	7	1	9
Burkina Faso*	3	2	0	1	4	2	6
Sudan*	3	1	0	2	1	5	3
Equatorial Guinea	3	0	0	3	2	6	0

*Advance to knockout rounds

Group F

Dec 24 – Marrakesh
Ivory Coast 1 (Amad 49)
Mozambique 0

Dec 24 – Agadir
Cameroon 1 (Etta Eyong 6)
Gabon 0

Dec 28 – Agadir
Gabon 2 (Aubameyang 45+5, Moucketou-Moussounda 76)
Mozambique 3 (Bangal 37, Catamo 42 pen, Calila 52)

Dec 28 – Marrakesh
Ivory Coast 1 (Amad 51)
Cameroon 1 (Konan 56 og)

Dec 31 – Marrakesh
Gabon 2 (Kanga 11, Bouanga 21)
Ivory Coast 3 (Krasso 44, Guessand 84, Toure 90+1)

Dec 31 – Agadir
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 23)
Cameroon 2 (Nene 28 og, Kofane 55)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast*	3	2	1	0	5	3	7
Cameroon*	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Mozambique*	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Gabon	3	0	0	3	4	7	0

*Advance to knockout rounds

Last 16

Jan 3 – Tangier
Senegal 3 (P. Gueye 29, 45+3, Mbaye 77)
Sudan 1 (Abdallah 6)

Jan 3 – Casablanca
Mali 1 (Sinayoko 90+6 pen)
Tunisia 1 (Chaouat 88)
After Extra-Time; Mali win 3-2 on pens

Jan 4 – Rabat
Morocco 1 (Brahim 64)
Tanzania 0

Jan 4 – Rabat
South Africa 1 (Makgopa 88)
Cameroon 2 (Tchamadeu 34, Kofane 47)

Jan 5 – Agadir
Egypt 3 (Attia 69, Ibrahim 97, Salah 120+4)
Benin 1 (Dossou 83)
After Extra-Time

Jan 5 – Fez
Nigeria 4 (Lookman 20, Osimhen 25, 47, Adams 75)
Mozambique 0

Jan 6 – Rabat
Algeria 1 (Boulbina 119)
DR Congo 0
After Extra-Time

Jan 6 – Marrakesh
Ivory Coast 3 (Amad 20, Y. Diomande 32, Toure 87)
Burkina Faso 0

Quarter-Finals

Jan 9 – Tangier
Mali 0
Senegal 1 (I. Ndiaye 27)

Jan 9 – Rabat
Cameroon 0
Morocco 2 (Brahim 26, Saibari 74)

Jan 10 – Marrakesh
Algeria 0
Nigeria 2 (Osimhen 47, Adams 57)

Jan 10 – Agadir
Egypt 3 (Marmoush 4, Rabia 32, Salah 52)
Ivory Coast 2 (Fatouh 40 og, Doue 73)

Semi-Finals

Jan 14 – Tangier
Senegal 1 (Mane 78)
Egypt 0

Jan 14 – Rabat
Nigeria 0
Morocco 0
After Extra-Time; Morocco win 4-2 on pens

Third-Place Play-Off

Jan 17 – Casablanca
Egypt 0
Nigeria 0
Nigeria win 4-2 on pens

Final

Jan 18 – Rabat
Senegal 1 (P. Gueye 94)
Morocco 0
After Extra-Time
Senegal: E. Mendy – A. Mendy (Seck 77), M. Sarr, Niakhate, E. Diouf (Jakobs 106); L. Camara (I. Sarr 77), I. Gueye, P. Gueye; I. Ndiaye (Mbaye 77), Jackson (C. Ndiaye 90+3), Mane.
Morocco: Bounou – Hakimi, Aguerd, Masina (El Yamiq 89), Mazraoui (Igamane 98); El Aynaoui; Brahim (Akhomach 98), El Khannouss (Targhalline 80), Saibari (Salah-Eddine 94), Ezzalzouli; El Kaabi (En-Nesyri 80).

FRIENDLIES

Dec 16 – Cairo
Egypt 2 (Saber 28, Mohamed 53)
Nigeria 1 (Awaziem 45+3)

Dec 16 – Murcia
Zambia 0
DR Congo 2 (Masuaku 21, Bushiri 72)

Dec 17 – Almancil
Angola 4 (Dala 25, Luvumbo 81, Carmo 90, Modesto 120)
Mozambique 1 (Witi 104 pen)
Friendly game pre-agreed to be played with extra-time

Dec 18 – Tabarka
Tunisia 2 (Sliti 85, 90+4 pen)
Botswana 1 (Orebonye 50)

Dec 21 – Chincha Alta
Peru 2 (Magallanes 87, Soyer 90)
Bolivia 0

Jan 18 – Los Angeles
Canada 1 (Russell-Rowe 66)
Guatemala 0

Jan 18 – Tarija
Bolivia 1 (Roberts 69 og)
Panama 1 (Barria 5)

Jan 18 – St George's
Grenada 0
Jamaica 1 (Fuller 81)

Jan 23 – Panama City
Panama 0
Mexico 1 (Peralta 90+3)

Jan 25 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Bolivia 0
Mexico 1 (Berterame 68)

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE play-offs

● *4 slots available*

Fixtures

Path A

Mar 26: Wales v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Italy v Northern Ireland
Final to take place on March 31

Path B

Mar 26: Ukraine v Sweden; Poland v Albania
Final to take place on March 31

Path C

Mar 26: Slovakia v Kosovo; Turkey v Romania
Final to take place on March 31

Path D

Mar 26: Czech Republic v Republic of Ireland; Denmark v North Macedonia
Final to take place on March 31

- *Four path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup*

INTER-CONFEDERATION play-offs

- *2 slots available*

Fixtures

Path 1

Mar 26: New Caledonia v Jamaica
Mar 31: DR Congo v semi-final winners

Path 2

Mar 26: Bolivia v Suriname
Mar 31: Iraq v semi-final winners

- *Two path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup*

Club Football EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 7

Jan 20 – Astana
Kairat (Kaz) 1 (Sadybekov 90+2)
Club Brugge (Bel) 4 (Stankovic 32, Vanaken 38, Vermant 74, Mechele 84)

Jan 20 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Hogh 22, 24, Hauge 58)
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (Cherki 60)

Jan 20 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Larsson 72)
Napoli (Ita) 1 (McTominay 39)

Jan 20 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Sucic 18)
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Gabriel Jesus 10, 31, Gyokeres 84)

Jan 20 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 2 (Costinha 2, Taremi 45+1)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0

Jan 20 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 6 (Mbappe 5, 26, Mastantuono 51, Kehrer 55 og, Vinicius Junior 63, Bellingham 80)
Monaco (Fra) 1 (Teze 72)

Jan 20 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 2 (Suarez 74, 90)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Kvaratskhelia 79)

Jan 20 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Romero 14, Solanke 37)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0

Jan 20 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 1 (Oluwaseyi 49)
Ajax (Ned) 2 (Gloukh 61, Edvardsen 90)

Jan 21 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Llorente 20 og)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Simeone 4)

Jan 21 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 3 (Duran 4, 80, Mustafazade 90+4)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 2 (Uzun 10, Chaibi 78 pen)

Jan 21 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Scamacca 16, Krstovic 88)
Athletic Club (Spa) 3 (Guruzeta 58, Serrano 70, Navarro 74)

Jan 21 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Caicedo 78)
Pafos (Cyp) 0

Jan 21 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Kane 52, 55 pen)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0

Jan 21 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Thuram 55, McKennie 64)
Benfica (Por) 0

Jan 21 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 3 (Wissa 8, Gordon 30, Barnes 65)
PSV (Ned) 0

Jan 21 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 0
Liverpool (Eng) 3 (Szoboszlai 45+1, Rulli 72 og, Gakpo 90+3)

Jan 21 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Kusej 10, Lewandowski 44 og)
Barcelona (Spa) 4 (Fermin 34, 42, Olmo 63, Lewandowski 71)

Matchday 8

Jan 28 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Dolberg 69 pen)
Olympiacos (Gre) 2 (Martins 52, Hezze 79)

Jan 28 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Gyokeres 3, Havertz 15, Martinelli 36)
Kairat (Kaz) 2 (Jorginho 7 pen, Ricardinho 90+4)

Jan 28 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 0
Juventus (Ita) 0

Jan 28 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 2 (Sancet 3, Guruzeta 28)
Sporting (Por) 3 (Diomande 12, Trincao 62, Alisson 90+4)

Jan 28 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Sorloth 15)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Sjovold 34, Hogh 59)

Jan 28 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 3 (Tillman 12, 35, Grimaldo 57)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Jan 28 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Dimarco 81, Diouf 90+4)

Jan 28 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Diakohn 4, Vermant 11, Stankovic 79)
Marseille (Fra) 0

Jan 28 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Kolo Muani 47, Solanke 77)

Jan 28 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 4 (Lewandowski 48, Yamal 60, Raphinha 69 pen, Rashford 85)
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Dadason 4)

Jan 28 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 6 (Mac Allister 15, 61, Wirtz 21, Salah 50, Ekitike 57, Chiesa 90)
Qarabag (Aze) 0

Jan 28 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 11, Cherki 29)
Galatasaray (Tur) 0

Jan 28 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 4 (Dragomir 17, Bruno 53, Anderson 84, Orsic 87)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 1 (Chaloupek 44)

Jan 28 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Vitinha 8)
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Willock 45+2)

Jan 28 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Saibari 78)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Musiala 58, Kane 84)

Jan 28 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Khalaily 70)
Atalanta (Ita) 0

Jan 28 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 4 (Schjelderup 36, 54, Pavlidis 45+5 pen, Trubin 90+8)
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Mbappe 30, 58)

Jan 28 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Vergara 33, Hojlund 43)
Chelsea (Eng) 3 (Fernandez 19 pen, Joao Pedro 61, 82)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arsenal*	8	8	0	0	23	4	24
Bayern Munich*	8	7	0	1	22	8	21
Liverpool*	8	6	0	2	20	8	18
Tottenham Hotspur*	8	5	2	1	17	7	17
Barcelona*	8	5	1	2	22	14	16
Chelsea*	8	5	1	2	17	10	16
Sporting*	8	5	1	2	17	11	16
Man City*	8	5	1	2	15	9	16
Real Madrid**	8	5	0	3	21	12	15
Inter**	8	5	0	3	15	7	15
PSG**	8	4	2	2	21	11	14
Newcastle Utd**	8	4	2	2	17	7	14
Juventus**	8	3	4	1	14	10	13
Atletico Madrid**	8	4	1	3	17	15	13
Atalanta**	8	4	1	3	10	10	13
B. Leverkusen**	8	3	3	2	13	14	12
B. Dortmund**	8	3	2	3	19	17	11
Olympiacos**	8	3	2	3	10	14	11
Club Brugge**	8	3	1	4	15	17	10
Galatasaray**	8	3	1	4	9	11	10
Monaco**	8	2	4	2	8	14	10
Qarabag**	8	3	1	4	13	21	10
Bodo/Glimt**	8	2	3	3	14	15	9
Benfica**	8	3	0	5	10	12	9
Marseille	8	3	0	5	11	14	9
Pafos	8	2	3	3	8	11	9
Union SG	8	3	0	5	8	17	9
PSV	8	2	2	4	16	16	8
Athletic Club	8	2	2	4	9	14	8
Napoli	8	2	2	4	9	15	8
Copenhagen	8	2	2	4	12	21	8
Ajax	8	2	0	6	8	21	6
E. Frankfurt	8	1	1	6	10	21	4
Slavia Prague	8	0	3	5	5	19	3
Villarreal	8	0	1	7	5	18	1
Kairat	8	0	1	7	7	22	1

**Qualify for last 16*
***Enter knockout round play-offs*
(full draw on page 56)

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 7

Jan 22 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 2 (Dallinga 58, Rowe 72)
Celtic (Sco) 2 (Hatate 6, Trusty 40)

Jan 22 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 0
Lyon (Fra) 1 (Maitland-Niles 45+1)

Jan 22 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Cerv 6)
Porto (Por) 1 (Gul 90)

Jan 22 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Sancho 25)

Jan 22 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Watanabe 5, Hadj Moussa 68, Borges 90)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0

Jan 22 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 0
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Kostov 16)

Jan 22 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 2 (Zivkovic 67, Giakoumakis 86 pen)
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Jan 22 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Matanovic 82)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0

Jan 22 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 3 (Holm 19, Kornvig 68 pen, Soltvedt 90+10 pen)
Midtjylland (Den) 3 (Erlic 4, 70, Junior Brumado 31)

Jan 22 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (Pisilli 40, 90+3)
Stuttgart (Ger) 0

Jan 22 – Utrecht
Utrecht (Ned) 0
Genk (Bel) 2 (El Ouahdi 54, Heymans 83 pen)

Jan 22 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 3 (Alajbegovic 4, 12, Kratzig 35)
Basel (Sui) 1 (Agbonifo 56)

Jan 22 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Yusuf 62 pen)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Zaroury 86)

Jan 22 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 4 (Bakrar 7, Beljo 11, 71, Kulenovic 90+3)
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Birligea 42)

Jan 22 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 3 (Vanhoutte 10, Gouveia 41, 59)
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 1 (Stokkers 68)

Jan 22 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Diomande 33)
Ludogorets (Bul) 0

Jan 22 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Swedberg 1, Starfelt 69)
Lille (Fra) 1 (Giroud 86)

Jan 22 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Yates 54 og)
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 0

Matchday 8

Jan 29 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Rogers 64, Mings 76, Jimoh-Aloba 87)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 2 (Lindelof 33 og, Yeo 49)

Jan 29 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 4 (Nygren 6, Viergever 10 og, Engels 19 pen, Trusty 66)
Utrecht (Ned) 2 (De Wit 44, Blake 62)

Jan 29 – Porto
Porto (Por) 3 (Mora 27, Moura 36, Fernandez 41 og)
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Gassama 6)

Jan 29 – Basek
Basel (Sui) 0
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Panos 39)

Jan 29 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Simsir 49, Bak 74)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0

Jan 29 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Duarte 89)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Lopez 88)

Jan 29 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Cisotti 71)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Yuksek 19)

Jan 29 – Deventer
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 0
Braga (Por) 0

Jan 29 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 2 (Heymans 45 pen, Karetsas 82)
Malmo (Swe) 1 (Ali 4)

Jan 29 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 1 (Giroud 90+2 pen)
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Jan 29 – Backa Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0
Bologna (Ita) 3 (Rowe 35, Orsolini 47, Pobega 90+4)

Jan 29 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 4 (Otvos 17 og, Igor Jesus 21, 55, McAtee 90 pen)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0

Jan 29 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 4 (Himbert 34, Merah 55, Karabec 88, Gomes Rodriguez 90+3)
PAOK (Gre) 2 (Giakoumakis 20, Meite 66)

Jan 29 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Taborda 58)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Ziolkowski 80)

Jan 29 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Stanic 42)
Nice (Fra) 0

Jan 29 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Antony 17, Ezzalzouli 32)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Tengstedt 77)

Jan 29 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Kiteishvili 85)
Brann (Nor) 0

Jan 29 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 3 (Undav 6, Demirovic 7, Andres 90)
Young Boys (Sui) 2 (Gigovic 42, Lauper 57)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lyon*	8	7	0	1	18	5	21
Aston Villa*	8	7	0	1	14	6	21
Midtjylland*	8	6	1	1	18	8	19
Real Betis*	8	5	2	1	13	7	17
Porto*	8	5	2	1	13	7	17
Braga*	8	5	2	1	11	5	17
Freiburg*	8	5	2	1	10	4	17
Roma*	8	5	1	2	13	6	16
Genk**	8	5	1	2	11	7	16
Bologna**	8	4	3	1	14	7	15
Stuttgart**	8	5	0	3	15	9	15
Ferencvaros**	8	4	3	1	12	11	15
Nott'm Forest**	8	4	2	2	15	7	14
Viktoria Plzen**	8	3	5	0	8	3	14
Red Star Belgrade**	8	4	2	2	7	6	14
Celta Vigo**	8	4	1	3	15	11	13
PAOK**	8	3	3	2	17	14	12
Lille**	8	4	0	4	12	9	12
Fenerbahce**	8	3	3	2	10	7	12
Panathinaikos**	8	3	3	2	11	9	12
Celtic**	8	3	2	3	13	15	11
Ludogorets**	8	3	1	4	12	15	10
Dinamo Zagreb**	8	3	1	4	12	16	10
Brann**	8	2	3	3	9	11	9
Young Boys	8	3	0	5	10	16	9
Sturm Graz	8	2	1	5	5	11	7
FCSB	8	2	1	5	9	16	7
Go Ahead Eagles	8	2	1	5	6	14	7
Feyenoord	8	2	0	6	11	15	6
Basel	8	2	0	6	9	13	6
Salzburg	8	2	0	6	10	15	6
Rangers	8	1	1	6	5	14	4
Nice	8	1	0	7	7	15	3
Utrecht	8	0	1	7	5	15	1
Malmo	8	0	1	7	4	15	1
Maccabi Tel Aviv	8	0	1	7	2	22	1

*Qualify for last 16
**Enter knockout round play-offs
(full draw on page 56)

2025 FRENCH SUPER CUP

Final

Jan 8 – Kuwait City
Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Dembele 13, Ramos 90+5)
Marseille 2 (Greenwood 76 pen, Pacho 87 og)
Paris Saint-Germain win 4-1 on pens

2026 SPANISH SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Jan 7 – Jeddah
Barcelona 5 (Torres 22, Fermin 30, Bardghji 34, Raphinha 38, 52)
Athletic Club 0

Jan 8 – Jeddah
Atletico Madrid 1 (Sorloth 58)
Real Madrid 2 (Valverde 2, Rodrygo 55)

Final

Jan 11 – Jeddah
Barcelona 3 (Raphinha 36, 73, Lewandowski 45+4)
Real Madrid 2 (Vinicius Junior 45+2, G. Garcia 45+6)

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Qualifying Draw

First Stage

The Strongest (Bol) v Deportivo Tachira (Ven);
Juventud (Uru) v Universidad Catolica (Ecu);
2 de Mayo (Par) v Alianza Lima (Per)

- *First legs took place February 3-5;*
- *Second legs took place February 10-12*

Second Stage

Juventud (Uru)/Universidad Catolica (Ecu) v Guarani (Par);
The Strongest (Bol)/Deportivo Tachira (Ven) v Tolima (Col);
2 de Mayo (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per) v Sporting Cristal (Per);
Barcelona SC (Ecu) v Argentinos Juniors (Arg);
Nacional Potosi (Bol) v Botafogo (Bra);
Carabobo (Ven) v Huachipato (Chi);
O'Higgins (Chi) v Bahia (Bra);
Liverpool (Uru) v Independiente Medellin (Col)

- *First legs take place February 17-19;*
- *Second legs take place February 24-26*

Third Stage

Juventud (Uru)/Universidad Catolica (Ecu)/Guarani (Par) v Liverpool (Uru)/Independiente Medellin (Col);
The Strongest (Bol)/Deportivo Tachira (Ven)/Tolima (Col) v O'Higgins (Chi)/Bahia (Bra);
2 de Mayo (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per)/Sporting Cristal (Per) v Carabobo (Ven)/Huachipato (Chi);
Barcelona SC (Ecu)/Argentinos Juniors (Arg) v Nacional Potosi (Bol)/Botafogo (Bra)

- *First legs take place March 3-5;*
- *Second legs take place March 10-12*

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Qualifying Draw

First Stage – Bolivia section

Independiente Petrolero v Guabira;
Blooming v San Antonio Bulo Bulo

First Stage – Chile section

Universidad de Chile v Palestino;
Cobresal v Audax Italiano

First Stage – Colombia section

Atletico Nacional v Millonarios;
America de Cali v Atletico Bucaramanga

First Stage – Ecuador section

Deportivo Cuenca v Libertad;
Orense v Macara

First Stage – Paraguay section

Nacional v Recoleta;
Sportivo Trinidense v Olimpia

First Stage – Peru section

Alianza Atletico v Deportivo Garcilaso;
Cienciano v Melgar

First Stage – Uruguay section

Montevideo City Torque v Defensor Sporting;
Boston River v Racing

First Stage – Venezuela section

Academia Puerto Cabello v Monagas;
Caracas v Metropolitanos

- *All single-leg ties take place March 3-5*

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Jan 24 – Ndola
Power Dynamos (Zam) 0
Rivers United (Nga) 0

Jan 24 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 0
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Feb 1 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 0
Power Dynamos (Zam) 1 (Chiboni 50)

Feb 1 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (Zalaka 11, Maher 74, Atef 80)
RS Berkane (Mar) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pyramids	4	3	1	0	7	0	10
RS Berkane	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Power Dynamos	4	1	1	2	1	4	4
Rivers United	4	0	1	3	1	6	1

Group B

Jan 23 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Trezeguet 45+3, 75)
Young Africans (Tan) 0

Jan 24 – Tizi Ouzou
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0
AS FAR (Mar) 0

Jan 31 – Zanzibar City
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Hamad 45+1)
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Dieng 60)

Jan 31 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Khabba 74)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly	4	2	2	0	8	3	8
Young Africans	4	1	2	1	2	3	5
AS FAR	4	1	2	1	2	2	5
JS Kabylie	4	0	2	2	1	5	2

Group C

Jan 23 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Sales 22, Mokoena 64)
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 2 (Raouf 15, 71)

Jan 25 – Lubumbashi
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Kimputu 90+5 pen)
MC Alger (Alg) 0

Jan 30 – Benghazi
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 2 (Abdelrahman 45+3 pen, Girumugisha 49)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Sales 61)

Feb 1 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 2 (Khelif 53, Naidji 82)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal	4	2	2	0	7	5	8
M. Sundowns	4	1	2	1	6	5	5
MC Alger	4	1	1	2	3	3	4
St-Eloi Lupopo	4	1	1	2	3	6	4

Group D

Jan 24 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Diarra 21)
Simba (Tan) 0

Jan 25 – Bamako
Stade Malien (Mli) 2 (Nkeng 54, M. Traore 59)
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0

Jan 31 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0
Stade Malien (Mli) 0

Feb 1 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 2 (Kapombe 39, Kagoma 45)
Esperance (Tun) 2 (Diakite 64, Boualia 79)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stade Malien	4	2	2	0	4	1	8
Esperance	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Petro Atletico	4	1	2	1	2	3	5
Simba	4	0	1	3	3	6	1

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Jan 24 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 2 (Draoui 13, Khaldi 84)
Djoliba (Mli) 0

Jan 25 – San Pedro
San Pedro (Civ) 1 (Karamoko 36)
Olympic Safi (Mar) 2 (Khannouss 1, El Moudane 40 pen)

Feb 1 – Safi
Olympic Safi (Mar) 2 (Errahouli 29, Kone 88)
San Pedro (Civ) 1 (Allou 90+2)

Feb 1 – Bamako
Djoliba (Mli) 0
USM Alger (Alg) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	4	3	1	0	6	2	10
Olympic Safi	4	3	0	1	4	2	9
San Pedro	4	1	0	3	5	6	3
Djoliba	4	0	1	3	0	5	1

Group B

Jan 25 – Nairobi
Nairobi United (Ken) 1 (Odhiambo 13)
Azam (Tan) 2 (Kitambala 17, Mohammed 78 og)

Jan 25 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Moufid 81)
Maniema Union (Cod) 0

Feb 1 – Zanzibar City
Azam (Tan) 1 (Salum 12)
Nairobi United (Ken) 0

Feb 1 – Kinshasa
Maniema Union (Cod) 2 (Namboka 33, Benabid 61 og)
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Hannouri 66 pen)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wydad	4	3	0	1	6	2	9
Maniema Union	4	3	0	1	5	2	9
Azam	4	2	0	2	3	4	6
Nairobi United	4	0	0	4	1	7	0

Group C

Jan 25 – Zanzibar City
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 1 (Rupia 37)
AS Otoho (Cgo) 0

Jan 25 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 2 (Belhocini 5, El Melali 90+5 pen)
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0

Feb 1 – Brazzaville
AS Otoho (Cgo) 2 (Nzaou 52, 80)
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 1 (Guede Gnadou 89)

Feb 1 – Cape Town
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 3 (Ben Hammouda 19, Belhocini 80, Abbaci 88)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CR Belouizdad	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
AS Otoho	4	2	0	2	6	4	6
Stellenbosch	4	1	1	2	2	6	4
Singida Black Stars	4	1	1	2	3	5	4

Group D

Jan 25 – Ndola
ZESCO United (Zam) 0
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1 (Mmodi 2)

Jan 25 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 0
Al Masry (Egy) 0

Feb 1 – Johannesburg
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1 (Lilepo 14)
ZESCO United (Zam) 0

Feb 1 – Suez
Al Masry (Egy) 1 (Mohsen 34 pen)
Zamalek (Egy) 2 (Abdelmaguid 24 pen, Dabbagh 75)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek	4	2	2	0	4	2	8
Al Masry	4	2	1	1	6	5	7
Kaizer Chiefs	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
ZESCO United	4	0	0	4	2	6	0

OCEANIA

2026 OFC PRO LEAGUE

Circuit 1

Jan 17 – Auckland
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Saniel 21, Cardona 90+6)
Bula FC (Fij) 2 (Krishna 29, Begg 71)

Jan 17 – Auckland
Auckland FC (Nzl) 3 (Faulds 31, Ferguson 83, Gillion 88 pen)
South Island United (Nzl) 0

Jan 18 – Auckland
Tahiti United (Tah) 1 (Shan 35)
South Melbourne (Aus) 2 (Uchida 47, Mesourouni 90+8)

Jan 18 – Auckland
PNG Hekari (PNG) 0
Solomon Kings (Sol) 1 (Higashide 59)

Jan 20 – Albany
Bula FC (Fij) P
South Island United (Nzl) P
Postponed due to adverse weather conditions

Jan 20 – Albany
Auckland FC (Nzl) 3 (Vicelich 8, Tade 20, Ellis 69)
Vanuatu United (Van) 1 (Tasip 51)

Jan 21 – Albany
Tahiti United (Tah) P
PNG Hekari (PNG) P
Postponed due to adverse weather conditions

Jan 21 – Albany
South Melbourne (Aus) P
Solomon Kings (Sol) P
Postponed due to adverse weather conditions

Jan 23 – Albany
South Island United (Nzl) 2 (Feutz 4, Zeb 9)
Vanuatu United (Van) 1 (Saniel 67)

Jan 23 – Albany
Auckland FC (Nzl) 1 (Normann 12)
Bula FC (Fij) 0

Jan 24 – Albany
Solomon Kings (Sol) 0
Tahiti United (Tah) 0

Jan 24 – Albany
PNG Hekari (PNG) 0
South Melbourne (Aus) 5 (Giannakopoulos 3, Swibel 7, 57, Mikkola 45, Bonada 87)

Circuit 2

Vanuatu United (Van) v Tahiti United (Tah); PNG Hekari (PNG) v Auckland FC (Nzl); South Island United (Nzl) v South Melbourne (Aus); Bula FC (Fij) v Solomon Kings (Sol)

Tahiti United (Tah) v Auckland FC (Nzl); PNG Hekari (PNG) v Vanuatu United (Van); Solomon Kings (Sol) v South Island United (Nzl); Bula FC (Fij) v South Melbourne (Aus)

Auckland FC (Nzl) v Solomon Kings (Sol); PNG Hekari (PNG) v South Island United (Nzl); South Melbourne (Aus) v Vanuatu United (Van); Tahiti United (Tah) v Bula FC (Fij)

● *Matches took place January 31-February 1, February 3-4 and February 7-8*

Circuit 3

Tahiti United (Tah) v South Island United (Nzl); South Melbourne (Aus) v Auckland FC (Nzl); Bula FC (Fij) v Vanuatu United (Van); Solomon Kings (Sol) v PNG Hekari (PNG)

South Island United (Nzl) v Auckland FC (Nzl); South Melbourne (Aus) v Tahiti United (Tah); Vanuatu United (Van) v Solomon Kings (Sol); PNG Hekari (PNG) v Bula FC (Fij)

Auckland FC (Nzl) v Tahiti United (Tah); South Melbourne (Aus) v South Island United (Nzl); Vanuatu United (Van) v PNG Hekari (PNG); Solomon Kings (Sol) v Bula FC (Fij)

● *Matches take place February 21-22, February 24-25 and February 27-28*

Circuit 4

South Island United (Nzl) v PNG Hekari (PNG); Solomon Kings (Sol) v Auckland FC (Nzl); Vanuatu United (Van) v South Melbourne (Aus); Bula FC (Fij) v Tahiti United (Tah)

Vanuatu United (Van) v Auckland FC (Nzl); PNG Hekari (PNG) v Tahiti United (Tah); South Island United (Nzl) v Bula FC (Fij); Solomon Kings (Sol) v South Melbourne (Aus)

● *Matches take place March 14-15 and March 18-19*

Circuit 5

Vanuatu United (Van) v South Island United (Nzl); Tahiti United (Tah) v Solomon Kings (Sol); Auckland FC (Nzl) v South Melbourne (Aus); Bula FC (Fij) v PNG Hekari (PNG)

South Island United (Nzl) v Tahiti United (Tah); Solomon Kings (Sol) v Vanuatu United (Van); Auckland FC (Nzl) v PNG Hekari (PNG); South Melbourne (Aus) v Bula FC (Fij)

South Island United (Nzl) v Solomon Kings (Sol); Tahiti United (Tah) v Vanuatu United (Van); South Melbourne (Aus) v PNG Hekari (PNG); Bula FC (Fij) v Auckland FC (Nzl)

● *Matches take place April 11-12, April 14-15 and April 17-18*

2026 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Qualifying Draw

Matchday 1

Vaivase-Tai (Sam) v Pago Youth (Asa)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) v Nukuhetulu (Tga)

Matchday 2

Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) v Vaivase-Tai (Sam)
Pago Youth (Asa) v Nukuhetulu (Tga)

Matchday 3

Nukuhetulu (Tga) v Vaivase-Tai (Sam)
Pago Youth (Asa) v Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok)

● *Matches took place January 31-February 6; qualifying review to follow in April's issue*

ASIA

2025-26 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals – West Region

Mar 4:
Al Ansar (Lbn) v Muras United (Kgz)
Al Shabab (Oma) v Al Kuwait (Kuw)

Mar 11:
Muras United (Kgz) v Al Ansar (Lbn)
Al Kuwait (Kuw) v Al Shabab (Oma)

Quarter-Finals – East Region

Mar 5:
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) v PKR Svay Rieng (Cam)
Manila Digger (Phi) v Dewa United (Idn)

Mar 12:
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) v PKR Svay Rieng (Cam)
Manila Digger (Phi) v Dewa United (Idn)

Final Table

AFGHANISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Abu Muslim (C)	9	9	0	0	30	2	27
Sorkh Poshan Khafi	9	8	0	1	31	4	24
Sarrafan	9	5	2	2	12	11	17
Arman	9	4	1	4	14	7	13
Khurasan	9	3	3	3	9	10	12
Aino	9	3	1	5	9	22	10
Sarsabz Yashlar	9	2	2	5	9	14	8
Istiqlal Club	9	2	2	5	11	27	8
Jawanan Perozi	9	1	4	4	4	13	7
Ettifaq Khanzadah	9	0	1	8	8	27	1

CONCACAF

Final Table

CUBA
Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
La Habana* (C)	5	4	0	1	16	7	12
Santiago de Cuba*	5	3	1	1	16	8	10
Guantanamo**	5	2	2	1	10	7	8
Villa Clara**	5	2	1	2	10	7	7
Cienfuegos	5	1	0	4	8	17	3
Las Tunas	5	1	0	4	4	18	3

*Advance to final
**Advance to third place play-off

Third Place Play-Off

Dec 14: Guantanamo 0-0 Villa Clara (*Guantanamo win 3-2 on pens*)

Final

Dec 14: La Habana 2-1 Santiago de Cuba

March 2026 *Vol. 66 No.7*

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ipso Regulated

Tomasz Radzinski

Anderlecht v Manchester United

2000-01 Champions League, Brussels

Before he made his name as a livewire striker in the Premier League with Everton and Fulham, the Canada international stunned the English champions with a brace in Brussels

Career-defining... Radzinski celebrates his first goal against Manchester United

"This game changed the course of my career.

Part of the reason I joined Everton in 2001, and spent six years in the Premier League, was because of the two goals I scored against Manchester United. Apparently, Sir Alex Ferguson told his friend, the Everton manager Walter Smith, that he should consider signing me if he needed a striker. I'm so glad he did.

I'd played in Europe before, but never in the Champions League. United had won the competition in 1999, with that incredible comeback against Bayern Munich. Just over a year later, we were competing against pretty much the same team, which was a very special experience.

After making it through the qualifiers, our first group-stage game was away to United. This was another level entirely and they thrashed us 5-1. The occasion, and the enormity of playing at Old Trafford, overwhelmed us.

Losing so heavily was a wake-up call. We had so much team spirit at Anderlecht. We were friends away from football too, which I think was a big part of our success. We'd fallen on our faces, but we were going to stick together.

We were really strong at home, beating PSV and Dynamo Kyiv. I scored twice in the 4-2 win over Kyiv, which gave everyone a lot of confidence. With the fans so close to the action, they made a lot of noise and became our 12th man.

Looking back, there was something in the air on the night United visited. You can see how focused all my team-mates were when we lined up before the game, while the Champions League anthem played. For the first hour, we were by far the better team and could have been even further ahead. Fabien Barthez saved two shots from me and Jan Koller had a couple of chances too.

I had a lot of joy with United's high line. That's how the first goal came about. As their defence pushed up, I found the right moment to run in behind Mikael Silvestre and collect Walter Baseggio's ball over the top. While sprinting at full speed, I controlled the ball well with my chest. I was on my left foot and only had Barthez to beat. He managed to get a hand to my shot, but it still went in.

For the second goal, I came short and played a one-two on the halfway line, then started moving towards the penalty area. My big strike partner Koller made a run down the right wing, which he absolutely never did, and crossed the ball low to the edge of the box. I ran onto it and finished first time into the far corner. It was one of those games where I couldn't do anything wrong.

Anderlecht 2-1 Manchester United
(Radzinski 15, 33) (Irwin 36 pen)

Anderlecht				Manchester United		
Coach: Aime Anthuenis				Coach: Alex Ferguson		
Dheedene	Goor			Beckham	G. Neville	
Staelens	Vanderhaeghe	Radzinski (Dindane 90)	Cole	Butt	Johnsen	
De Wilde					Barthez	
De Boeck	Baseggio	Koller	Yorke	Scholes	Silvestre (Brown 63)	
Crasson	Stoica (Oyen 81)			Giggs	Irwin (Solskjaer 78)	

Brace...Radzinski fires past Fabien Barthez for his second goal

United hit back almost immediately to make it 2-1. Andy Cole, who I played with years later at Fulham, went down [in the area] as two of our defenders challenged him for the ball. Denis Irwin slipped taking the penalty, but he still scored – now we really had to be on our toes.

In the second half, we started sitting deeper and defending more. I didn't see much of the ball, but we really dug deep and limited them to very few chances. What United did to Bayern Munich in injury time was always in the back of our minds. They were all over us by the end, but our defence did a tremendous job.

I was substituted to a standing ovation in the 90th minute. Watching the final moments from the bench was so nail-biting. We were desperate for the final whistle. At full-time, I ran straight back onto the pitch to celebrate, and swap shirts with Dwight Yorke.

We then beat PSV to top our group, which was completely surreal, especially after we'd lost our first game 5-1. We were on cloud nine. Nothing could touch us. Everybody now felt like we belonged in the Champions League.

> "Sir Alex Ferguson told Walter Smith, that he should consider signing me. I'm so glad he did"

It's incredible to think this happened over 25 years ago. Living in Belgium, people still stop me in the street to take pictures and talk about this game. It's only since I retired that I realised how much it means to the fans when you bring success to their club. The emotion that football inspires is just amazing."

Interview by Sean Cole

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MARCH 20